

Public Policy Education: An Expanding Role for Land Grant Colleges¹

Edmund M. Tavernier and Maurice P. Hartley

Edmund M. Tavernier is an assistant professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Marketing, Rutgers University. He received his B.S. degree from Tuskegee University, Alabama, and M.S. and Ph.D. degrees from the Department of Applied Economics, University of Minnesota. Dr. Tavernier's areas of interest are agricultural and environmental policy.

Maurice P. Hartley is a Professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Marketing, Rutgers University. He received his B.A. from Carson-Newman College, Tennessee, M.A. degree from Appalachian State University, North Carolina, and Ed.D. degree from, Rutgers University. His teaching and research concentrate on management human systems development, and applications of psychology in education.

Address: Department of Agricultural Economics and Marketing, P.O. Box 231, Cook College, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey 08903. **Tel:** (908) 932-9197 ext. 23; **Fax:** (908) 932-8887; **e-mail:** Tavernier@aesop.rutgers.edu.

¹This study was supported in part by the funds of USDA.

Public Policy Education: An Expanding Role for Land Grant Colleges

Abstract

This paper examines the new and expanding role of public policy education at land grant colleges. While past public policy education programming involved the provision of agricultural production-related services to farmers, a new and vocal audience of environmentalists, policy makers and non-farm public is emerging to pose significant challenges to extension programming. These challenges revolve around consensus building and conflict resolution strategies. Results from this study suggest that extension professionals may be ill-prepared to address these challenges because they are trained in the basic sciences and the necessary skills and practices needed are found in the social sciences including psychology and education.

Public Policy Education: An Expanding Role for Land Grant Colleges

Introduction

Public policy education (PPE), by definition is education about issues and policies that affect the public and thus has always been an important component of the extension mission of land grant colleges. Traditionally, this mission was to take information and recommendations that were generated by public or private research institutions or laboratories and encourage farmers to adopt practices arising from the scientific research (Hytche, 1993). In this function extension professionals had a distinct clientele, notably farmers whom they served. However, this function is gradually expanding to include more diverse audiences.

The inclusion of more diverse audiences becomes necessary because environmental and natural resource concerns are emerging as important areas in the public policy debate. As a result, extension arms of land grant colleges are often called upon to play a major role in helping to resolve conflicts because faculty as scientists have the responsibility to be objective, balanced, and neutral as they serve and work directly with people who are affected by public policy decisions. These decisions generally foster or involve disagreement and controversy which result from different roles, values, interests, and ideas. Thus, the Cooperative Extension System (CES) in recent years has established parameters which guide the involvement of extension professionals in public policy education. The basic parameters include roles as (i) invited speaker or sought after expert to provide and explain research data, (ii) educator in the numerous processes of policy development, including the development of community leadership skills; and (iii) convener/facilitator in providing the opportunity for diverse audiences to resolve contentious issues.

Lange (1996) argues that the role of convener/facilitator is perhaps the most difficult for most CE professionals to accept. This difficulty may arise from the faculty member's professional identity as an expert and resource for the farmer and his/her role as a problem solver in areas relating to conflict. Moreover, many agricultural agents trained in the basic sciences do not have a foundation in strategies and practices found in the social sciences including psychology and education. These disciplines provide much of the knowledge and skills in group and community processes which can enhance the role of CES professionals as facilitators in issues of community conflict.

The conflict intervention role which CES professionals are often ask to play provides perhaps the greatest opportunity for CES to serve communities. This role is one not readily played by any other organization because of issues related to neutrality. Tavernier et al. (1995b) and Lange (1996) argue that Extension professionals can play a significant role in conflict resolution because many have already established credibility as mediators through their record of service and work with individuals and groups who are directly affected by public policy issues. However, to be effective Extension professionals must (i) identify policy issues in the early stages of their evolution, (ii) involve stakeholders in the identifying issues that are important to them, and (iii) explicitly note different perceptions about the issue in order to avoid being labelled as preferring a particular group (Dale and Hahn, 1994). These factors provide the essential elements for the involvement of CE professionals in PPE, yet are often lacking as an integral part of extension programming. This failure may ill-prepare extension professionals for the changes in new extension responsibilities around PPE that are occurring at land grant colleges.

Changing Roles and Forces of Change

Lund (1995) suggests that land grant colleges are changing, not necessarily out of choice, but because factors outside their control are forcing change upon them. Those factors include the rise of non-traditional vested-interest groups that have larger roles in local, state, and national policy making (Tavernier, et al., 1995a). These groups exert considerable influence on public policy issues, rarely speak with one voice and often hold a variety of views on controversial issues. The issues often focus on the role of the chemical and pesticide industries in environmental degradation rather than their contribution to improvements in crop and livestock productivity (Francis, et al., 1990). For example, the environment has benefitted from high-yielding agricultural varieties which have increased food production using fewer acres and thereby decreasing the likelihood of environmental degradation. Thus the positive contributions of agriculturalists are often not considered in the debate between environmentalists and farmers which increases the difficulty of finding common ground between the two groups. Further, although consensus may exist on some issues, the diversity of perceptions and vested interests contributes to increased tension, mistrust, and disharmony. These perceptions and resulting conflicts create obstacles to convening the groups to work and build on areas of consensus.

The difficulty of bringing divergent groups together has amplified the need for extension agents at land grant colleges to become involved in public policy issues. This involvement is a departure from their traditional role, extension agents were to both pass information from the college to the farmer and bring the farmers' needs to the college (Bonnen, 1986). In this role farmers were the primary constituents and points of reference from start to finish and their priorities were often satisfied before all other groups (Chambers, 1986). This exclusive focus is

changing because of socio-economic and demographic developments.

Among the developments, the shift from rural to an urban society is particularly significant. This shift means that less than 2% of the U.S. population actually lives on farms and suggests that much of the political power has moved away from rural counties to urban areas. As a result of this shift, political representatives are more likely to be responsive to their urban constituents who get them elected (Tavernier et al., 1995b). For example, legislatures in many states have passed agricultural land-use zoning statutes in response to environmental concerns (Hand, 1984; Lapping et al., 1983). These statutes protect environmental amenities but are likely to erode the equity of farmers (Adelaja et al., 1989). Although they are unpopular with farmers these statutes remain important legislation in several states.

Changes in agricultural practices and yields have also contributed to the move away from the traditional role of land grant colleges. Eckel (1995) argues that since 1930 one-third of the U.S. population (nearly 28 million farmers) involved in food production left the farm to pursue other productive non-farm careers. The 1.8 million farmers who remained on the farms made significant increases in agricultural productivity. The increases provided an abundant food supply and diminished food security concerns which tends to lessen support for agriculture (Tavernier, et al., 1995a). As a result agricultural practices are questioned more than ever and greater accountability is demanded of agriculture from all citizens. This attitude suggests that the reservoir of goodwill towards agriculture is drying up (Libby, 1994). It also suggests that agriculture's ability to achieve real impact on agricultural-related issues might best be served if strategic alliances were developed to work directly and collaboratively with all groups. Thus, it is clear that in their new role extension professionals are simultaneously serving different

clients and therefore have to be sensitive to the demands of all sides. This role not only creates challenges and opportunities for serving the public, it requires a re-orientation of the way information is presented for public consumption. Hahn (1996) suggests that public policy decisions need to address the collective good, a condition which is difficult to achieve when information needed to sustain collaborative efforts are provided for individual decision-making. Hence, when public decisions are implemented, it is essential to provide a mechanism to help society or a community address the implications of those decisions. These facets of public policy were rarely undertaken in the traditional role.

Agriculture and the Environment

The move away from the traditional role places new challenges on extension professionals accustomed to serving specialized clientele. Although agricultural agents promote alternative agricultural practices which have a positive effect on the environment and reduce the influence of the chemical industry on farming, the public perception is that farmers often use excess chemicals and fertilizers to the detriment of the environment and public health and safety (Francis et al., 1990). Furthermore, most citizens have only a vague appreciation of the positive contributions of agriculture to the economy, open space, aesthetics and quality of life and this suggests that education efforts are lacking in those areas (Russell et al., 1990). Byers (1995) argues that environmentalists and farmers are natural allies because both groups want a healthy and nutritious food supply, productive soils, and an abundance of farmland. Jengo (1995) indicates that protecting the environment and ensuring a sound economy, two policy goals often seen as conflicting, can actually be symbiotic. Watson (1995) argues that addressing the

immediate local and economic concerns of farmers is essential for environment conservation. Thus, it appears that there exists potential for Extension professionals to find common ground upon which farmers and environmentalists can build constructive partnership.

Researchers have advanced several approaches for achieving cooperation among diverse audiences. Tavernier and Hartley (1995) provide a coalition building model which uses a focus group and consensus building approach to bring stakeholders together. Hahn (1988) presents an issue evolution/educational intervention model which assumes that an educator can determine the current stage of an issue and design and implement appropriate intervention for that stage. These models provide several elements such as including multiple perspectives, having a structured process, laying the ground rules, having a shared information base, and seeking mutually acceptable solutions for achieving common ground which facilitates public policy education. Although the elements provide important guidelines for cooperation and collaboration, the decision regarding the stage at which stakeholders might be included in the process may pose some problems. Lockeretz and Anderson (1990) argue that although collaboration with farmers is important, it may not always be necessary that farmers play a major role in defining the parameters of research. Alternatively, Watkins (1990) suggests that farmers should be involved in the entire research process rather than as "subordinates or passive recipients of research results." Francis et al. (1990) suggest that the collaborative efforts of university, industry, farmer groups and environmental organizations will be needed to fully empower the individual farm operator to make rational and environmentally sound production decisions in the future. While the above arguments enhance the chances of a productive relationship among stakeholders public policy education efforts are needed to help stakeholders, including extension professionals, make

wise public choices.

An Exercise in Conflict Resolution

The issues and practices involving environmental protection, agriculture and public policy development, have become increasingly complex and hence call for expanded training in PPE, consensus building, and conflict resolution strategies. The training opportunities provide a basis for assessing the readiness of extension professionals who wish to engage in PPE around contentious issues. Such readiness was assessed at an in-service training workshop sponsored by the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture and Research and Education program was held March 1, 1996 on the Cook College campus, New Jersey.

An overarching goal of the workshop was to provide the capacity to extension professionals who completed the training to reach and involve diverse audiences, create structures and programs that facilitated learning about the perceptions, needs, and objectives of the respective interest groups (e.g. agriculturalists, environmentalist, policy makers, the general public) and to contribute substantively to dispute resolution. Specifically, the workshop sought to demonstrate and apply consensus building and public policy education skills in simulation exercises based upon real-life problems such as conflicts involving resource utilization, zoning and planning, property rights, and other problems on the rural/urban interface. Hence, the workshop provided an opportunity for extension professionals to mediate a conflict.

The workshop simulation exercises involved a hypothetical farmer, Mr. Brown, who grew potatoes and other vegetables on a 300+ acre family-owned farm and also ran a small seasonal produce stand. The farm was located in one of the last rural pockets of a rapidly developing

county, and was surrounded on three sides by single family and town house communities. Mr. Brown received several telephone calls from homeowners located nearest the edge of his property, complaining of the noise and dust from his harvesting activities. Earlier in the year, the neighbors complained of odors coming from the potato fields and the cauliflower left on the ground from the previous harvest.

Mr. Brown agreed to meet with Ms. Green, a representative from the surrounding developments, to discuss their concerns. The local agricultural agent agreed to facilitate the discussion between Ms. Green and Mr. Brown.

Mr. Brown was eager to meet with the local agricultural agent and this "city slicker," Ms. Green about the complaints to his operations. He prided himself on keeping up with all the rules and restrictions that govern modern farming operations and believed that the "city folks" should have realized what they were getting into when they bought their fancy "country estates".

Ms. Green was not quite sure what to expect from this meeting with Mr. Brown, but she was determined to hold her ground and make him understand how awful it was to live downwind of his farm. She, like the rest of her neighbors, was tired of the constant layer of red dust that coated their cars, window sills and draperies, and the huge electric bills that resulted because they could not hang their clothes on the line to dry. In addition the smell of rotting vegetables was unbearable (Mroczo, 1996).

The above scenario provided the opportunity for extension professionals to experience the role of dispute resolver and practice mediation techniques in a guided, safe, and educational environment. In addition to Ms Green, Mr. Brown and the local agricultural agent, the scenario also consisted of an observer who provided the facilitator with suggestions to improve his/her

facilitation skills after observing the exercise. The four participants rotated roles to allow each person an opportunity to experience the various sides of a conflict.

While many saw the value in serving as facilitators/interveners versus problem-solvers, they reported that to be effective in their "new role" would necessitate a shift in expectations from the farm community in the role/services that extension agents provided. The majority of those who participated in the exercises said that their current role required them to give advice and answers and to provide solutions to their clientele's problems. Thus, they experienced extreme difficulty acting as neutral interveners and reported an increasing temptation to solve the problem for the "disputants."

Several occurrences during the role playing highlighted some of the pitfalls for extension agents who participate in conflict resolution. These included (i) familiarity/allegiances with one of the parties, (ii) expert position and/or personal opinion, (iii) the departure from the role of a science-based expert, to an expert on process resolution role, and (iv) tolerance of non-expert group input as participants sort through "obvious" inappropriate solutions. Ninety-three percent of participants in the Cook College workshop reported that the role playing and subsequent feedback and discussion was informative and appreciated the difficulty of mediating from an extension perspective.

Lange (1996) poses some interesting questions regarding the role of extension personnel and CES in conflict resolution. Among them, what does CES facilitation of contentious issues offer to a larger picture? Who values facilitation of contentious issues? What are its long-term educational benefits? Does the reward system recognize and honor those benefits? How does facilitation of contentious issues conceptually fit with the idea that the educational role of CES

is to provide a solution that is systematic, portable, and useable by others? What organizational and personal pitfalls exist if extension personnel embarked on conflict resolution? Should a faculty member's professional identity as an expert now be adjusted to include that of being a convener or facilitator? These questions become major considerations when extension professionals decide to participate in some manner in a policy issue. Given the new role of extension professionals they are questions that will have to be addressed sooner than later.

Conclusion

PPE has always been an important function of land grant colleges. This function traditionally involved the provision of agricultural production-related services but is changing to include a more diverse audience of environmentalists, policy makers and the non-farm public. These audiences are causing a re-orientation of the extension focus of land grant colleges because the public policy issues revolving around environmental and natural resource concerns are often contentious and cut across constituencies. The potential for conflict in such cases is enhanced and thus special skills are needed by extension professionals involved in public policy education. These skills have their knowledge base in social sciences or educational disciplines while extension professionals who are often called to resolve conflicts are normally trained in basic sciences.

The results of this study suggest this science training may be inadequate because of the contentious nature of many public policy issues. For example, when asked to mediate a conflict in simulation exercises, extension professionals reported extreme difficulty in refraining from interjecting their opinion or expert positions on the issue. Further, they reported and increasing

temptation to solve the problem for the "disputants." This temptation is understandable for in their current role extension professionals are required to give advice and provide answers to their clientele's problems. However, their role as facilitators requires that the solutions come from the stakeholders to the dispute.

It is clear that the new role poses some interesting questions for the extension function of land grant colleges. For example, is this role acceptable to and valued by land grant colleges? Should new parameters be defined to guide extension programming? What are the long-term benefits for extension professionals engaged in public policy education? While answers to these questions may take extension into a whole new realm, they may help position the CES for addressing the issues that extension professionals may face in the 21st century.

References

- Adelaja, A., D. Derr and K. Rose-Tank. "Economic and Equity Implications of Land-Use Zoning in Suburban Agriculture." *J. Agric. Ethics*, 2, 97-122, 1989.
- Bonnen, J. T. "The Institutional Structures Associated with Agricultural Science: What Have we Learned?" Presented at the Agricultural Science Workshop, April 29-May 2, 1986, Agricultural research Institute, Wayzata, Minnesota.
- Byers, M. S. "Environment and Agriculture:Common Ground," in Proceedings: Coalitions for Agriculture an the Environment in Urbanizing Areas, E. M. Tavernier, M. P. Hartley, A. O. Adelaja, and R. G. Brumfield, editors, Cook College/NJAES Office of Communications and Public Affairs, August 1995.
- Chambers, R. "To Make the Flip: Strategy for Participatory R and D for Undervalued Agriculture. Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, United Kingdom.
- Dale, D. D. and A. J. Hahn (eds). "Public Issues Education: Increasing Competence in Resolving Public Issues, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin-Extension, 1994.
- Eckel, K. W. "U.S. Agriculture in the 21st Century: Growing and Challenged," in Proceedings: Coalitions for Agriculture an the Environment in Urbanizing Areas, E. M. Tavernier, M. P. Hartley, A. O. Adelaja, and R. G. Brumfield, editors, Cook College/NJAES Office of Communications and Public Affairs, August 1995.
- Francis, C., J. King, J. DeWitt, J. Bushnell and L. Lucas. "Participatory Strategies for Information Exchange," *Amer. J. Alter. Agric.*, 5(1990):153-160.
- Hahn, A. J. "Comments: Public Issues Education," Presentation at the Strategic Planning and

- Public Issues Education and Problem Solving In-Service Training Workshop,
Cook/Douglass Campus, Rutgers University, March 1, 1996.
- _____ "Resolving Public Issues and Concerns Through Policy Education," Cornell
Cooperative Extension, 1988.
- Hand, J. P. "Right-to-Farm Laws: Breaking New Ground in the Preservation of Farmland,"
University of Pittsburg Law Rev. 45, 289-350, 1984.
- Hytche, W. P. "Information Technology and the 1890 Land-Grant Colleges and Universities."
J. Agri. and Food Information, 1(1993):21-28.
- Jengo, J. "Coalition for Agriculture and the Environment: A Policy Perspective," in
Proceedings: Coalitions for Agriculture an the Environment in Urbanizing Areas, E. M.
Tavernier, M. P. Hartley, A. O. Adelaja, and R. G. Brumfield, editors, Cook
College/NJAES Office of Communications and Public Affairs, August 1995.
- Lange, L. J. "Public Issues Education in the Current Land-Grant Environment," Presentation at
the Strategic Planning and Public Issues Education and Problem Solving In-Service
Training Workshop, Cook/Douglass Campus, Rutgers University, March 1, 1996.
- Lapping, M. B., G. E. Penfold, & S. Macpherson. "Right-to-Farm Laws: Do They Resolve
Land Use Conflicts?" *J. Soil and Water Cons.* 26 (1983):465-67.
- Libby, L.W. "Conflict on the Commons: Natural Resource Entitlements, The Public Interest da
Agricultural Economics," Presidential Address, American Agricultural Economics
Association Annual Meeting, San Diego, California, August 7-10, 1994.
- Lockeretz, W. and M. D. Anderson. "Farmers' Role in Sustainable Agriculture Research," *Amer.*
J. Alter. Agric., 5(1990):178-182.

- Lund, D. "Cook's Tour: A View from the State University" *New Jersey Farmer*, January 1995, p.8
- Mroczo, J. "Simulation Exercise in Conflict Resolution," Presentation at the Strategic Planning and Public Issues Education and Problem Solving In-Service Training Workshop, Cook/Douglass Campus, Rutgers University, March 1, 1996.
- Russell, E.B., J.D. McCracken, and W.W. Miller. "Position Statement on Agricultural Literacy." *Educ. Magazine* 62(1990):13-14, 23.
- Schuh, G.E. "Political and Social Trends Affecting the 1860 Land-Grant Institutions," *J. Agri. and Food Information*, 1(1992):5-20.
- Tavernier, E. M. and M. P. Hartley "A Model for Coalition Building in Urbanizing Areas," *Journal of Extension* 33(October, 1995) *electronic*.
- Tavernier, E. M., M. P. Hartley, A. M. Rhinesmith, and R. A. Moseley "A Framework for and Exercise in Public Policy Education," *The Reporter* Summer, 1995b.
- Tavernier, E. M., M. P. Hartley, A. O. Adelaja, R. G. Brumfield and Boris Bravo-Ureta. "Coalitions for Agriculture and the Environment in Urbanizing Areas," Final Report to The Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development, September 1995a.
- Watkins, G. "Participatory Research: A Farmer's Perspective," *J. Alter. Agric.*, 5(1990):161-162.
- Watson, G. "Agriculture's Role in Protecting the Environment: A Systems Approach," in Proceedings: Coalitions for Agriculture an the Environment in Urbanizing Areas, E. M. Tavernier, M . P. Hartley, A. O. Adelaja, and R. G. Brumfield, editors, Cook College/NJAES Office of Communications and Public Affairs, August 1995.