

Informing The Legislature

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Abstract

Pennsylvania, similar to many other states, has faced a tremendous shift of legislative make-up in recent years from rural to urban representation.

Informing The Legislature

JACK W. MACMILLAN

PENNSYLVANIA, similar to many other states, has faced a tremendous shift of legislative make-up in recent years from rural to urban representation.

The problem of seeking public support and public monies for College of Agriculture programs from an urban-oriented legislature has been of increasing concern.

The initial hurdle is simply gaining the attention of this influential audience. The second phase of the problem is simply (and not so simply) communicating the needs of agriculture and the rural community with relevancy to the needs of society as a whole.

The average legislator is an extremely busy person. He is constantly under pressure from lobbyists at the state-level and constituents at home who vie for his attention, his advice, and his vote on a multitude of programs and problems. He is inundated with information and opinions designed to influence him on budget priorities and special-interest legislation.

Administrators of Penn State's College of Agriculture, as well as members of the University's Agricultural Advisory Council, concluded that an educational and informative "Symposium for Legislators" could effectively portray the programs and objectives of the College.

We keyed our program to contemporary problems in Pennsylvania, emphasizing environmental quality, foods, and nutrition. Our purpose was to identify some of these problems and then describe ways in which the College was seeking solutions.

Personal invitations were sent to legislators and wives from four key committees in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. The two-day program (May 21-22, 1970) was timed to follow the Pennsylvania primaries, thus reducing the number of possible cancellations due to "campaign trail" activities.

Although the College had the basic program responsibility for the Symposium, the Advisory Council accepted the responsibility of hosting the legislative guests. Contributions from the Council, which is composed of representatives of 65 ag-related organizations in the Commonwealth, financed the housing, receptions, banquet, and luncheons for the guests.

A joint committee of Ag Advisory Council and University staff members worked out the logistic details in an efficient manner. The entertainment factor, although important, was always secondary to the educational and informative aspects of the program. Wives were included in all the sessions and on the educational tours.

Despite pressing work schedules and prior commitments, 26 key legislators, including the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, attended the Symposium. It was generally agreed we succeeded in bringing a great majority of key legislators to campus—including a few who had never been to Penn State, let alone the College of Agriculture.

Communications Role

The basic plan for the Symposium was to put our best foot forward with an hour-long, multiple-screen slide and film presentation in an air-conditioned auditorium. It had to be good, because the legislators had (in many cases) traveled a considerable distance and enjoyed a "lulling" buffet luncheon prior to the start of the program.

We believe this initial presentation was the key to the success of the two-day program. Visual aid specialist Carl O. Dossin, Jr., used a multiple-screen technique and a synchronized script read by the Dean to briefly trace the history of the University and the College (5 minutes); show the economic importance of agriculture to Pennsylvania and the changes taking place (5 minutes); and the work of the three divisions of the College in relation to contemporary problems, clientele, and needs (10 minutes).

This entire first half of the presentation, including an informal welcome and an introductory cartoon, took less than 30 minutes. The pace was rapid and the script and unique visual techniques held the attention of the audience.

The second half of the presentation consisted of slides and films of selected research projects designed to improve environ-

mental quality. We used taped interviews with the researchers and at the same time had slides or film running of these researchers in action in laboratories or in the field.

We selected research projects relevant to contemporary problems in Pennsylvania. These included waste water disposal research; revegetation of strip mine spoil banks; food safety research; air pollution studies; waste management techniques for agricultural and processing wastes; and biological control of pests.

The concluding hour of the afternoon program was devoted to a stimulating panel discussion of Extension's expanded nutrition aide program for low-income families. Aides with first-hand knowledge of ghetto conditions told of their successes and problems in working with low-income people.

It was apparent by the end of the day that legislators, both urban and rural, were able to relate one or more of these active programs to problems in their home areas.

A tour of research facilities was conducted on the morning of the second day of the Symposium. It was not just a tour of buildings, sophisticated equipment, and test-tube cluttered laboratories.

At each stop, researchers were waiting with demonstrations and well-planned "mini-lectures" on their work. The project was clearly explained in layman's language and time was allotted for questions and informal discussion. In most cases, the project being discussed was one they had been acquainted with through the Dean's visual presentation of the previous day.

The tour ran "on schedule" and was completed in time for a return to a farewell buffet luncheon.

During the tours, photographers and ag communicators teamed up to document legislative interest in the research. Photos and cutlines were mailed out within 24 hours to home town newspapers of the individual legislators. The "take" was excellent and the legislators later expressed gratitude for the favorable publicity generated by the Symposium. It was obvious that they were pleased to be shown taking an interest in agricultural and environmental research being conducted at the University.

Information gleaned at the Symposium was later quoted and written into the legislative record by the lawmakers. There was also some concrete evidence that the favorable image created by the College of Agriculture was of assistance in hearings held on University appropriations several months later.

Although administrators and staff members involved in this presentation were reasonably certain that they had scored "a direct hit" with this program, few were prepared for the residual benefits which followed:

Within a few days of the original presentation in May 1970, the University President's Office requested a private viewing of the hour-long, multiple-screen slide show for the Board of Trustees and selected members of the administrative staff.

The second showing was carried off without a hitch and, like the ever expanding ripple from a stone cast in quiet waters, similar requests began to pour into the Dean's Office. (The College of Agriculture had suddenly been rediscovered.)

Within the next few months, the show or re-packaged portions of it was presented to: International Farm Youth Exchange alumni; Penn State's Agricultural Advisory Council; the College of Agriculture faculty and ag students on the University Park Campus; the staff of the University's Continuing Education Division; and the Pennsylvania Higher Education Committee.

Portions of the show were used by the Dean in a special report to the Pennsylvania Congressional Delegation in Washington, D.C., in December 1970. The entire slide and film presentation has been scheduled for the Pennsylvania Lime and Fertilizer Conference on the main campus January 28, 1971.

Scheduling problems and the lack of proper production facilities at some off-campus locations has made it impossible for the Dean to honor all requests for the presentation.

Plans have been made for duplicating the slide sets and film strips to make possible a re-packaging of the show for viewing in the counties and elsewhere. The problem has been to find time between commitments to work out the technical aspects involved in taking the show "on the road."

Plans are currently being formulated to present the slide show to a College of Agriculture alumni group in the spring of 1971 and to revise the Symposium in the future for both state and federal legislators.

Agricultural organizations as well as College and University administrators have agreed the special effort to inform legislators and others of the activities and programs within the College of Agriculture is well worthwhile.