

POLICY PROCESS MODELS AND THE EDUCATOR'S ROLE

*Barry L. Flinchbaugh
Kansas State University*

Issues at the forefront of policy education include: what, when, who and how. To elaborate: (1) selection of topics(s), (2) timing of program delivery, (3) prospective recipients of program and (4) method of analysis.

The answer to these questions depends on which model or models, laid out so clearly by Hahn in the previous article, the policy educator wishes to follow. I wish to describe our program in Kansas as an instructive example. It has worked for us.

In the Kansas public policy education extension program we select an issue each year that meets two broad criteria. First the issue must be identified by local and state leaders as controversial and important to Kansas. We discover this by keeping in constant contact with leaders at the state level and rely on county extension agents for the local input. Second, we must be able to assemble the expertise to establish fact, destroy myth and analyze alternative solutions and their probable consequences. This may be accomplished within our own staff and through such national projects as "Who Will Control U.S. Agriculture."

Our topic last year was "Reappraisal and Classification of Property for Tax Purposes." This preceded a general election vote on a classification amendment to the Kansas Constitution. This coming winter our topic will be "Mid-Course Corrections in the '85 Farm Bill." This effort will be enhanced by materials developed through the national satellite program at the University of Maryland and the National Public Policy Education Committee project on "Policy Choices for a Changing Agriculture."

Selection of the issue in policy education is critical. It must be controversial enough to generate interest but not so "hot" that rational discussion is impossible. In the words of the late policy educator J. B. "Heavy" Kohlmeyer, "when the trenches are dug and the guns are pointed it's time for war not education." At the same time, Christmas trees are a dime a dozen on December 26.

Equally crucial to selecting an issue is the decision to whom will the policy education program be directed toward. Selection of the "audience" will determine: (1) the impact of the program and (2) the method used in disseminating the information. Thus an understanding of the policy making process is an essential tool in the kit of an extension policy educator.

Our programs in Kansas have been directed to the decision makers using the Kingmaker/King model of public decision making. We attempt to select a cross section of leaders, or kings as they are called in the model. Such individuals as city and county commissioners, legislators and organization leaders (general farm organizations, commodity groups, chambers of commerce, labor unions) are included. These individuals receive a personal invitation that explains the topic, the format and who else has been invited by position. Since the kingmakers (a few highly influential people at the top of the hierarchy) operate behind the scenes and are rarely visible at public meetings, we rely on the kings to impart our information and analysis to them. Our experience is such that we are convinced this occurs. Crucial to the success of working with the decision makers is the format employed. We strive for objectivity using the alternatives/consequence approach.

Simultaneously with policy analysis seminars for decision makers we conduct awareness programs for active and interested citizens. We do this through extension communications with press releases and electronic media interviews. Last year we conducted a policy analysis seminar on reappraisal and classification via satellite. The feedback was encouraging. Video tapes have possibilities to increase awareness of public issues. However if the goal is to reach the decision makers there is no substitution for eyeball-to-eyeball contact.

Policy analysis seminars and awareness media input provides opportunities for the policy educator to serve as a technician in the policy process. Influentials make public decisions through elected officials. However, the infusion of accurate information is itself influential. Legislators and congressmen use our information and seek our analysis primarily because we have no special interest axe to grind. I have found this role to be very rewarding. But to succeed at it one must understand the policy process and have a keen sense of timing. In addition, of course, one must provide correct information and in-depth analysis.

Extension policy educators have a track record for which we need not make any apologies. However, the '90s will provide us with unmatched opportunities for input and influence. Policy education by its very nature is issue oriented. As I argued in my extension address at the 1987 American Agricultural Economics Association meetings, if extension is to succeed in focusing on the set of national initiatives recently developed, it must adopt an issue orientation.

As concentration increases in agriculture many argue extension will have fewer and fewer clientele. I disagree. Concentration in agriculture will increase the number of controversial issues rather than decrease them. This will require that our colleagues throughout the extension system understand the policy process, learn to identify the decision makers and plug into the process.

Extension public policy educators are a giant step ahead of other extension professionals in experience in the policy arena. The role awaits leaders. It can be us. We will succeed if in the final analysis we subscribe to Jefferson's belief that an informed citizenry can govern itself wisely.