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## Needed: Coursework Addressing Agricultural Stress

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Stress in the agricultural sector has skyrocketed in the past few years (Magnuson, 1985). The Rural Concern telephone hotline in Iowa received 451 calls the first week of operation. Most of these calls focused on financial problems and were stress-related (Extension Mobilizes," 1985). A similar confidential farm-financial counseling service, operated by the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service, had more than 300 calls in the first ten days of operation. At least 80% of the callers were referred to counselors for in-depth consultation including county extension advisers specializing in farm-financial and family counseling. ("Farmers Welcome Rural Route," 1985).

Farmers are not only losing jobs, but also losing land that may have been in their families for generations. Losing a farm often means losing a way-of-life — perhaps the only lifestyle known for generations. Desperate straits are not necessarily reserved for "poor managers" or "bad" farmers. Many were quite aggressive in their expansion efforts during the days of lower interest rates and rising land prices. However, these same farmers today have a higher debt-to-asset ratio than crop prices will support.

USDA figures show that financial stress, ranging from insolvency to extreme cash flow problems, is being experienced by 93,000 of the nation's mid-size farms ("Financial Stress," 1985). The March 1984 Crop and Livestock Reporting Service Survey reported that 11,000 farm operators, in Iowa alone, may have to leave farming because of financial pressures during the 1984-85 fiscal year.

The effects of this financial stress are spilling over into the farm credit systems and commercial banks. The USDA reports that commercial banks, which hold nearly 20% of all farm debt, have had sharp increases in delinquencies and loan losses. The entire pipeline of resources is affected. In early 1985, farm machinery sold at 50 to 75% of the actual retail price (Matthews, 1985). Extension of credit became the number one problem for fertilizer and chemical dealers tied 100% to the farmer. Implement, fertilizer, and chemical dealers are all asking for credit reference from farmers who have done business with these dealers for years.

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If the present farm situation continues, between five and seven percent of the remaining farmers will discontinue their operation during each of the next three to five years. The demise of this once seemingly healthy agricultural economic base will affect the over 21 million jobs throughout the economy that exist because of the resources needed and commodities produced by farmers. Those involved in counseling distraught farmers have noticed an increase in social problems such as alcoholism, increased divorce rates, increased suicide or threats of suicide and child abuse. Where financial stress exists, social stress appears to rise (Magnuson, 1985).

Financial problems are always coupled with personal changes and, usually, tremendous personal problems. Change becomes a certainty in a family's life cycle. During these uncertain economic times, this change and uncertainty are faced daily by many farm families. While change itself is not bad, negative financial change can threaten the health, well-being and very existence of a family.

Certainly the kinds of changes demanded of farm families facing foreclosure or tight financial situations brings on a series of undesirable changes in employment, home and lifestyle, not to mention the change in self-esteem, peers, and social status. It can be documented that the amount of stress experienced as a result of change is influenced by the number of stressful events occurring; the accumulation of many changes over time takes its toll emotionally and physically on all family members (Robinson, 1982).

Most farm families have neither faced nor have even been willing to contemplate the sorts of problems brought on by current economic conditions. Many students majoring in agriculture come from a farm background; like their parents, they may not be aware of the effects of stress on themselves nor know how to help others deal with these stressors. Other students who have not been reared on the farm simply may not be sensitive to the many pressures facing those in agriculture today. Hence, a course or seminar addressing this topic, "Stress in Today's Agriculture," would be appropriate in today's agricultural curriculum.

Such a course might address the following topics:

— How stress affects lifestyle and behavior — physically, mentally, and emotionally.

— Improvement of stress management skills — coping skills to manage personal, family and work stress without marital discord, alcohol or drug abuse,

or other health problems such as ulcers or high blood pressure.

— Development of a wellness lifestyle — a way of living that promotes physical and mental health regardless of stresses.

— Improvement of communication and helping skills.

This course would address some of the current sociological aspects facing a farmer's well-being. These issues have not been so salient in "better-times" for farmers. Today, changing technology, land prices, interest rates, and volatile markets, coupled with the age-old stressors of weather and equipment breakdowns have a cumulative effect on farmers and farm families. While farmers are eager to seek information about the latest pesticide or technique in livestock management, they are not accustomed to going outside the home for help with personal problems which may be related to stress. A course at the college level may help reverse this situation.

Iowa State University extension specialists explain that how families respond to change is partly influenced by the emotional, social, interpersonal and material resources of the family (Wiegel, 1981). The more of these resources a family has, the better they are likely to cope successfully with change. A family may have some of these resources, but it is up to relatives, neighbors, friends and the community to provide social and emotional support on an ongoing basis. These social ties act as both interpersonal resources (emotional support as well as services such as child care) and practical resources (information and access to formal organizations) (Bronfenbrenner et. al., 1984). Social networks are particularly crucial as a means of exerting influence and enhancing self-esteem. Encouraging use of these networks is especially crucial for farm families, who have long prided themselves on their independence, seeking and finding their own necessary social support systems. According to University of Illinois Extension administrators ("Farmers Welcome Rural Route." 1985), "We're continuing to place increased emphasis on family-resource management and family life programs because we know the economic situation is having a great deal of impact on entire families."

The agriculture curriculum has long addressed the cost-benefit of various production management and marketing practices. However, the human costs of effects of stress for the unique population of those employed in agriculture, has not been a usual component in a student's academic career. Following is a sample course outline and syllabus to meet this need.

### Course Outline

| Session No. | Topic                                |
|-------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1           | Introduction and outline of course   |
| 2           | Current situation and causal factors |
| 3-4         | Recognizing stress in others         |
| 5-6         | Recognizing stress in yourself       |

|       |   |
|-------|---|
| 7-8   | Time management - how it increases stress, procedures for efficient time use  |
| 9-10  | Depression - signs, symptoms, treatment   |
| 11    | Alcoholism - recognition and handling   |
| 12    | Suicide - recognition and handling  |
| 13    | Other mental problems caused by stress  |
| 14    | Stress factors in the future  |
| 15    | Test I  |
| 16-18 | Ag lender - financing procedures which cause and can reduce stress and case studies                                 |
| 19    | Insurance agent - role of insurance in farm stress management   |
| 20-21 | Lawyer - legal arrangement in stressful situations and case studies   |
| 22    | Medical doctor - health problems related to stress; developing wellness lifestyle                                   |
| 23    | Nutritionist - nutritional needs when under stress, role of diet in health  |
| 24-25 | Minister/priest - role of spiritual well-being in stress reduction and case studies                                 |
| 26    | Test II   |
| 27-29 | Stress counselors - coping with stressors and developing a wellness lifestyle, case studies                         |
| 30-32 | Family counselor or family life specialist — importance of a strong family  |
| 33-35 | Agribusiness person - stress in agribusiness, dealing with a poor farm economy, and dealing with stressed customers |
| 36-38 | Panel of farmers - how stress affects ability to manage business and personal life                                  |
| 39-42 | Situation enactments  |
| 43-47 | Paper presentation  |
| 48    | Review  |

The course is basically divided into four sections. Section I includes sessions 1-14 and deals mainly with readings (possible text: **Stress and how to live with it** by J. Robinson). Aspects of stress dealt with by those not in the stress situation is covered in section II, sessions 16-25. Outside speakers would be relied upon heavily for this section, as would they also in section III, sessions 27-42. After the background provided in sections I and II, section III deals more directly with the situation, including situation enactments. Students would be involved in role-playing a given situation to realize more fully the problems that erupt and how they and others may react. In sessions 43-47, section IV, papers on specific topics would be presented by the students with discussion following each.

Upon completing the course, a student would:

- be able to identify stressors in agriculture
- be able to apply various ways to deal with stress
- be able to identify support groups and understand their importance
- have the information to develop a personal wellness lifestyle

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## Teaching and Learning Problem: **ALCOHOL USE** D.F. Warring

Alcohol is the most widely abused drug in American colleges and universities. Among young adults in general, regular drinking of alcoholic beverages is more common than regular use of any other drug containing substances, including cigarettes and coffee (Dean, 1982). These facts may not surprise people familiar with recent publicity about drinking among young people. What is surprising is how little our colleges and universities including those teaching agriculture have been able to do in response to widespread drinking and its consequences.

Drinking in colleges and universities cannot be reduced by brief, narrow, or fragmented intervention. An effective program must deal with the full range of problems resulting from alcohol use and abuse in the college community, including the harmful effects of occasional drinking on driving, classroom performance, and personal relationships, not just alcoholism. The program must also contain a series of intervention options tailored to each problem and need not be designed only for the students. It should also set up a permanent structure for the discovering and intervening in drinking problems on the campus and for evaluating the effectiveness of various intervention measures.

Post-secondary institutions are communities made up of unique but interrelated units consisting of many subgroups with specific needs and strengths so that each one must be dealt with individually (Dean, 1982). An understanding of the reality of the uniqueness of the campus community and its effects on the surrounding community is crucial to the development of any effective alcohol program.

Many studies have investigated alcohol consumption, and the findings indicate an increasing use of alcohol by students (Hill and Bregen, 1979). In a survey administered to 38 University of Minnesota-Waseca students in February, 1984 (Table I), 29 reported that

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their alcohol consumption had increased since their enrollment there. In the same survey, 30 students reported that they feel that they get along better at social functions after they have had a drink. These results are consistent with the findings of Blane and Hewitt (1977), who found that approximately 66 percent of students who drink feel they get along better at social functions while drinking. However, the literature does suggest that misuse of alcohol and problem drinking are increasing (Kaplan, 1979).

Alcoholism is a stigmatizing term, and post-secondary students do not often fit the stereotypical image of people who suffer from alcoholism. Yet they are affected by the increasing use and abuse of alcohol (Ingalls, 1978). It is important, therefore, to adopt a conceptual model of alcohol problems that reflects the realities of alcohol use on the campus and that can be used as a base for intervention programming. This model, if it is to be the basis for effective program development, must encompass a wide range of alcohol useage behaviors. It must not be limited just to an addiction concept.

A range of alcohol problems exists that provides a continuum which lends itself very nicely to examining prevention. Primary prevention in the area of alcohol problems is directed at those individuals who engage in abstinence or social drinking behavior. Neither group experiences personal problems due to its use of alcohol, but both are potential victims of the impact of problem of addictive drinking in society. At UMW,

**Table 1. Alcohol Inventory (Totals)**

| 1.  | Sex:  | Male 24 | Female 14 | Total 38 |         |         |       |   |            |    |
|---|---|---------|-----------|----------|---------|---------|-------|---|------------|----|
| 2.  | I drank alcoholic beverages before leaving high school:                       |         |           |          |         |         |       |   |            |    |
|   | Yes 15  | No 23   |           |          |         |         |       |   |            |    |
| 3.  | I consumed my first drink at the following age:                               |         |           |          |         |         |       |   |            |    |
|   | under 13  | 8       | 13-15 15  | 16-18 12 | 19-21 3 |         |       |   |            |    |
| 4.  | I first became intoxicated at the age of:                                     |         |           |          |         |         |       |   |            |    |
|   | under 13  | 6       | 13-15 15  | 16-18 14 | 19-21 0 | Other 2 |       |   |            |    |
| For the following questions, use the key below for answering: |   |         |           |          |         |         |       |   |            |    |
|   | N - Never/Does not pertain  |         |           |          |         |         |       |   |            |    |
|   | O - Occasionally/Less than 25% of the time                                    |         |           |          |         |         |       |   |            |    |
|   | F - Frequently/About 50% of the time  |         |           |          |         |         |       |   |            |    |
|   | M - Most of the time/Around 75% of the time                                   |         |           |          |         |         |       |   |            |    |
|   | A - Always/Very close to 100% of the time                                     |         |           |          |         |         |       |   |            |    |
|   |   | N       | O         | F        | M       | A       |       |   |            |    |
| 5.  | I was allowed to drink at home:   | 12      | 18        | 2        | 6       | 0       |       |   |            |    |
| 6.  | I drink to get drunk:   | 11      | 18        | 3        | 3       | 3       |       |   |            |    |
| 7.  | I drink more than I set out to:   | 10      | 22        | 3        | 2       | 0       |       |   |            |    |
| 8.  | I feel I get along better at social functions after I've had a drink:         | 8       | 16        | 10       | 3       | 1       |       |   |            |    |
| 9.  | I know my drinking limits and stick to them:                                  | 4       | 11        | 5        | 11      | 7       |       |   |            |    |
| 10.   | I drink because I'm shy:  | 24      | 7         | 3        | 2       | 2       |       |   |            |    |
| 11.   | A few drinks help build up my self confidence:                                | 11      | 15        | 6        | 3       | 3       |       |   |            |    |
| 12.   | I think my alcohol consumption level has increased since I've enrolled at UMW | Yes     | 29        | No       |         | 9       |       |   |            |    |
| 13.   | I attend few parties because I don't drink:                                   | Yes     | 0         | No       |         | 38      |       |   |            |    |
| 14.   | I feel peer pressure to drink:  | Yes     | 24        | No       |         | 14      |       |   |            |    |
| 15.   | My average number of drinks per week is:                                      |         |           |          |         |         |       |   |            |    |
|   | 0   | 1       | 1-4       | 11       | 5-9     | 8       | 10-14 | 6 | 15 or more | 12 |