

Developing Professional Interest Among Undergraduate Majors

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Introduction

Undergraduate students in colleges of agriculture tend to have a rather superficial understanding of their chosen profession. As undergraduates, they concentrate primarily on developing manipulative skills in the use of the "tools" of the profession without developing an appreciation for its respective problems and challenges.

What, then, can be done to develop a better understanding of a profession among undergraduate majors? One way of bringing undergraduate students into the mainstream of professional thought and activity is through their participation in the professional association's annual meeting. Thus, the question really becomes one of how to encourage their participation.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly explain and evaluate the use of contests as a means of encouraging student attendance and participation in the American Agricultural Economics Association (AAEA). The ultimate objective of this activity, of course, is to promote interest in and understanding of the profession of agricultural economics among undergraduate college students.¹

History of AAEA Student Activities

Comparatively speaking, the undergraduate student activities of the association are of relatively recent origin. While the Association's history dates back to the early part of this century (1910), it was not until 1948 that student sections became an official part of the parent association. The Association's constitution was amended to authorize student sections (chapters) in colleges and universities offering courses in agricultural economics, farm management, or allied fields. Last year there were 32 chartered chapters in the U.S. and Canada.

The amendment further authorized a national student organization. One function of this organization (Student Section-American Agricultural Economics Association) is to help coordinate student program activities (including the contests) during the Association's annual conference. In addition, the organization publishes periodic newsletters, coordinates regional meetings, and encourages activities to build and strengthen local chapters.

Interest and participation in student ac-

tivities has continued to grow. Debating was initiated in 1952, public speaking in 1955, and an essay contest in 1964. Last year, 22 chapters had entrants in the contests with a total of 68 students participating. While participants in the essay contest are not required to attend, many do. Attendance is a prerequisite, of course, for debate and public speaking contests. Winners are appropriately recognized and rewarded as a part of the Association's annual award program near the close of the conference.

An effort is made in program planning to minimize conflicts between sessions of the parent association and the debate and public speaking finals. Students are encouraged to participate in the general sessions of the association and, likewise, AAEA members are urged to attend student activities.

Perhaps this approach, i.e. the use of contests to encourage student participation, is unique only in that the contests are held in conjunction with the Association's annual conference. While other professional associations sponsor and encourage this type of activity among undergraduate students, it is often apart from the association's annual conference.

Benefits

Benefits accrue to both the student and the Association from making the undergraduate activities an integral part of the annual program. For the Association, this provides an opportunity for promoting interest in the profession among top student leaders. For the student, this type of activity provides the incentive for in-depth probing of economic problems relating to agriculture. Although debate topics are assigned, public speaking and essay topics are open choice, thus allowing individuals to pursue various areas of interest.

The interchange of ideas among students from the various schools can be both stimulating and informative. New ideas regarding curricular as well as extra-curricular activities are gained. All of this tends to build esprit de corps in the agricultural economics profession as well as in local student chapters.

Perhaps the greatest benefit accruing to the student, as a result of this participation

in the annual meeting, is being able to meet and associate with members of the profession. Students have an opportunity to identify and associate with leaders in the profession. They gain greater insight into the problems to which members of the profession are currently addressing themselves.

Evaluation

Any evaluation of the effectiveness of this approach in generating interest in the agricultural economics profession must of necessity be somewhat subjective. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that contests have been helpful in bringing the undergraduate student into the mainstream of professional interest and thinking. One measure of this is the number of past contest participants who are currently carving a niche for themselves in the profession. The continued support (financially and otherwise) of these activities by the Association can at least be interpreted as prima facie evidence that there is payoff from this type of activity.

Perhaps the effectiveness of this approach is best summarized by the chairman of the AAEA Student Affairs Committee in a recent report to the AAEA Executive Board. "We are happy to report that we are getting increasing numbers of undergraduate students who are not in competition coming to the annual meetings, attending both the Student Section activities and the AAEA activities. It is heartening to see the enthusiasm for our profession that attendance at our annual meeting generates in these undergraduate students . . .

"We ask quite a few agricultural economists to be judges for the preliminary rounds of the contests. Many of these comment to me about how much they enjoy this opportunity to see these bright young men in action. Most indicate to me that this job is more a privilege than a chore. I firmly believe that the Student Section activities build enthusiasm on the part of students for the profession; and on the part of our Association members, appreciation for the student participants who will soon be the backbone of our Association."²

¹ A stated objective of the AAEA.

² Robert W. Taylor, "Report of the Student Affairs Committee", *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 52:860, Dec. 1970

Illinois Course Evaluation Questionnaire Useful in Collecting Student Opinion

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The measurement of the effectiveness of instruction is a complex problem. It may be approached in various ways. The Illinois Course Evaluation Questionnaire is designed to collect evidence of only one

kind — student opinion, which appears to be the most relevant kind.

At the University of Illinois College of Agriculture this questionnaire has been used extensively to evaluate the UNIVEX

NET instructional system and the individual courses taught for this system.¹ It has had modest acceptance for on campus course evaluation by the instructors of the College, but it is widely used in other col-