

In-Service Training Programs In Agricultural Economics Curricula

Milton L. Manuel and John H. McCoy*

What is the desirability of in-service training programs in agricultural economics instruction? To what extent do they contribute to a worthwhile learning experience that prepares students to work effectively in agribusiness firms and agencies? Or, is there something inherent in the very nature of in-service training programs that tends to make them sub-standard as a teaching technique? Questions such as these have concerned the authors. Concern is based partially upon personal experiences with such programs and in part by views expressed by others in the field.

One is immediately confronted with matters of definition and terminology. For purposes of this study we viewed an in-service training program as one whereby the undergraduate student would have a combination work-learning experience in the practical operations of a firm (or agency) to better prepare himself for productive employment in agribusiness with emphasis on management. An essential part of any such program is an agreement (either written or oral) between the university and the cooperating firm or agency to clarify what is expected of the student. A chief concern is that the student has an opportunity to observe the decision making process in practice.

There are several reasons why it is desirable to examine in-service training programs and to evaluate their possible merit in agribusiness management training. Agribusiness management training has grown to the point where it receives major emphasis in most agricultural economics departments. Therefore, techniques that might be especially useful for teaching in this area should be evaluated. In a study made of agribusiness education in 1961, Goldberg [1, p. 34] found that 43 of the 67 institutions surveyed reported having a degree or a major field of concentration in agribusiness. In response to another survey question, Goldberg found that 58 of the 67 institutions were planning a new program or a change in existing ones. Only nine institutions indicated they did not intend to develop a course or program in the area at that time [1, p. 35]. Goldberg's study gives us one of many clues to the increasing interest of agricultural economics departments in agribusiness education.

Secondly, there are increasing opportunities for those trained in agribusiness management. Agricultural colleges report today that 37 to 50 percent of each graduating class finds employment in the broad field of agricultural business and industry [2, p. 12]. But the fact that the field is broad creates some problems. Often students have difficulty in understanding specific job opportunities that are available. Merely to point out that many firms and agencies in the field of agribusiness are seeking employees is inadequate. Something must be done to demonstrate specifically what opportunities do exist.

Thirdly, in-service training programs might give some needed practical orientation in the application of course-

work training to solving problems for agribusiness firms and agencies. Most educators in the field of agricultural economics argue the desirability of basic training in the curriculum. At the same time the need for applied training is recognized. H. B. James summarized this view by stating, "My opinion is that a student should have enough applied training so that he is able to secure a job and to be successful in his first employment." [3, p. 283] It is possible that in-service training programs could help to identify opportunities and to contribute to a meaningful program in applied training.

OBJECTIVES

In view of apparent interest and justification for in-service training programs a national study was made to determine relevant characteristics of current programs and attitudes of university personnel associated with them. Major objectives of the study were to determine, (1) the extent to which in-service training programs are currently used by institutions offering work in agricultural economics, (2) characteristics of those programs, and (3) the effectiveness of such training in the educational program.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Characteristics of the universe. Institutions in the study were those known to be teaching agricultural economics. A letter was sent to each department head asking the following: "Does your department sponsor or participate in any in-service training programs for undergraduates? Of concern here are programs in which your department may be involved that provide training and experience for undergraduate students with business and/or agencies." Information was requested on names of programs and staff members in charge. The response was excellent. Returns were received from all 67 institutions. Twenty-two reported they had in-service training programs and furnished names of 34 different programs which were in operation at their institutions. Forty-five responded they had no such programs.

A detailed questionnaire was sent to the person directly in charge of the respective programs at each institution. Replies were received pertaining to all but one of these programs.

Characteristics of current programs. In comparison to total enrollment at the 21 respondent universities the number of student participants, i.e., 241 in 1966, was relatively small. Yet comments accompanying the returned questionnaires indicated a substantial interest in this type of program. Numerous changes of existing programs are underway and 7 of the 21 universities are considering the addition of 12 new programs. Five universities which do not

have programs at this time have plans to initiate one (or more).

Thirty-three in-service training programs were studied to determine their characteristics. Sixty percent of the universities grant academic credit ranging generally from 3 to 6 quarter hours (or the equivalent in semester hours). Grades, typically, are determined by written report, but oral examinations were used in conjunction with the written report in about one half of the cases. Written examinations are rarely used.

Sixty percent of the programs are full time arrangements for three summer months. Most of the remainder are operated concurrently with campus classes which necessitates cooperation with a firm or agency in close proximity to the campus. Only in one case was a program operated on an alternate semester (quarter) basis.

In 87 percent of the cases the student receives regular cash compensation during the period of the program with a modal amount of \$400 per month. Only in 4 of the 33 cases did the student receive additional compensation. Two of the four provided a scholarship during the academic year.

Participants generally are selected by personal interview which ordinarily is conducted by representatives of both the university and firm (or agency). Where civil service standards must be met a written examination is necessary. Programs currently in operation are almost equally divided between private enterprise type firms and public service agencies.

FEATURES OF SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS

Comments and suggestions received indicated a clear-cut consensus on several features of successful programs:

1. There must be a definite understanding between the university, cooperating firm (or agency), and student with respect to objectives and responsibilities of each party. Apparently, this can be done satisfactorily by oral agreement as 31 of the 33 programs studied were of this type.
2. It appears desirable to have a single staff member from a given institution supervise general aspects of in-service training programs. But he might draw upon the assistance of specialists in particular areas. The supervisor should be "close" to students as well as to industry and agency personnel.
3. A successful program requires a great deal of effort and staff time. This must be recognized in the department budget.
4. Programs should be designed to allow the student to observe the decision making process in action. In no case should student activities be viewed as a source of inexpensive help.
5. Specified minimal course requirements generally are considered desirable for most programs.
6. Both university and firm (or agency) personnel should collaborate in the selection of applicants.
7. Preplanning with the student, by both university supervisor and firm (or agency) supervisor, is of prime importance.
8. To initiate a new program it was suggested that (a) the first few pilot firms (or agencies) be picked carefully and if possible choose those managed by former students of the university, and (b) select industries (or agencies) with good potential for subsequent student employment.

IS THERE A PLACE FOR IN-SERVICE TRAINING?

Reaction to in-service training programs was for the most part very favorable. Some of the more relevant comments were that the program, (1) contributes to student employment opportunities, after graduation, (2) aids the student and his advisor in modifying selection of courses for future occupational plans, (3) gives the student first hand experience with problems faced by firms

(or agencies) in how decisions are made, (4) furnishes the student with a type of experience which is not possible in the classroom, (5) can be a valuable source of supplementary teaching materials for certain courses, (6) gives a student and a prospective employer an opportunity to observe and evaluate each other, (7) stimulates students to return to the campus with renewed enthusiasm for a career in agribusiness management, and (8) enhances public relations of firms (or agencies) as well as universities.

In-service training programs are not without shortcomings. Several staff members stated that supervisory time requirements were excessive. In some instances firms (or agencies) experienced difficulty in eventually employing many of the trainees.

REFERENCES

1. American Association of Land Grant Colleges and State Universities, "There's a New Challenge in Agriculture," a brochure prepared by the Resident Instruction Section, Division of Agriculture (undated).
2. Goldberg, Roy A., "The Agribusiness Survey," Agribusiness Management Curriculum Development and Teaching Programs, Proceedings of a workshop held at the Harvard School of Business Administration, August 8-15, 1962.
3. James, H. Brooks, "Objectives of Undergraduate Education," Journal of Farm Economics, Vol. 49, No. 1, Part II, February 1967.

Footnote

*Contributions to this study are acknowledged as follows: (1) the 67 departmental chairmen (or their representatives) who responded to the initial inquiry,¹ and (2) the 23 staff members who furnished information on current in-service programs and made suggestions for improvement.

Milton L. Manuel and John H. McCoy are professors of economics, Kansas State University.

¹A list of 67 colleges and universities was obtained from the committee that planned the Symposium for Teachers of Agricultural Economics, held at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, August 17-20, 1966.

1969 CONVENTION

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| Dates | June 16, 17, 18, 1969 |
| Place | New York Agricultural and Technical College Alfred, New York |
| Theme of Program | 2-year Technical programs and their relationship to Baccalaureate degree programs. |
| Registration | Monday morning, June 16. Sessions begin with luncheon at noon and end with a Smorgasbord. Delegates will be housed and fed at the college. |

Program Chairman:
Dr. William Stopper, Head
Agriculture Department
New York Agricultural and
Technical College
Alfred, New York