research in brief

Programming for Disadvantaged

Just how different must we be in planning programs for those "left behind"? Are we so sophisticated in Extension that the programming methods we use with the "participators" are inappropriate for reaching the "nonparticipators"? These practical questions must be answered if Extension is to achieve "balanced" programs.

To answer these questions, however, research is needed on other crucial questions: Do these participators think and communicate differently than our traditional audiences? Do they receive information and make decisions differently that necessitates adjusting our approaches for involving them?

Recent research by White, Boone, and others pursue these basic questions. Here are key conclusions reached in their study of 130 disadvantaged farm families:

1. They're older, highly immobile, politically naive, farming full-time, and as a group generally lack accepted norms of behavior and beliefs.
2. They engage in a broad range of farm and home decisions comparable to middle-class farm families, which "require" considerable technical knowledge and the ability to think logically.
3. They're "extremely rational" in their decision-making process.
4. Interpersonal media are used extensively, and perceived as highly credible.
5. About 1/3 of their decisions are closely linked to research, about 1/3 are distantly linked, and about 1/3 aren't linked to research.

So what do these findings have to do with developing programs? Assuming the risk of generalizing too far beyond their research, let me suggest a few ideas:

1. We shouldn't assume that program content for these people must differ from other programs. Their interests and needs are similar and we only need to make adjustments according to local circumstances.
2. We'll need to involve them on their turf. Immobility, age, and having trust in local people mean we'll have to approach them in their setting.
3. They're familiar with the potential of research as related to their work. We have a foot in the door. Let's use examples of previous success in building credibility on an interpersonal basis when planning future programs with them.
4. Let's not plan their programs for them. Given that the process of planning programs in the process of decision making, this study strongly supports the idea they can be involved in such planning and make logical decisions based on their needs and interests. Valuable programs for them will be ones to which they've applied their reasoning starting from their assumptions.
5. In such involvement, they'll need help in establishing realistic goals and expectations. They probably won't have norms to use as reference points in deciding what's idealistically and realistically possible.

These findings and suggestions aren't new. However, to accept them and apply them may be. By accepting them, we're saying "we met the enemy and he is us." By applying the ideas, we may need to reallocate our time and resources. Do we have the courage to do so?

Decision Making and Communication Patterns of Disadvantaged Farm Families in the North Carolina Coastal Plains Area. Technical Bulletin No. 245. Estelle White and Edgar Boone. Raleigh: North Carolina Agriculture Experiment Station, December, 1976.

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