

soft money: a blessing or a curse?

Bob M. Gassaway

In a time when inflation and funding competition are combining to shrink the resources available to Extension, it's often difficult to maintain the status quo, much less launch new programs.

But perseverance and creativity are paying dividends in the Meramec region of Missouri where Extension research has been conducted and a new program is underway—despite the fact that conventional funding wasn't available for the projects.

The answer proved to be soft money—the kind of funds that many Extension managers have often steered clear of because of uncertainty over the future availability of such resources.

Existing Need

The Meramec Extension faculty of the University of Missouri and Lincoln University knew that their region on the edge of the Ozarks was changing, and census figures confirmed their assessment. The six counties of the region were gaining many new residents who were fleeing the crowded cities. Some of the new residents were only looking for a place to live, but others wanted to augment their salary or retirement income with the proceeds of part-time farming on small holdings. Almost none of these new residents was being reached by standard Extension programs.

Marion Gentry, area Extension director, felt they couldn't be reached through the framework of the traditional state small farms program, the young farm family program, the farm family development program, or other conventional Extension efforts.

"We felt that people who lived on small farms definitely needed some help to reach their farm and family goals. But they weren't participating in Extension programs; they didn't know of the help they could get," Gentry says, as he recalls his early frustration with the problem.

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A series of public sessions organized in each county supported the feelings of the Extension faculty. Comments like the following about part-time farmers suggested a significant need for help:

- Part-time farmers generally need more education on farming than full-time farmers.
- This group needs extra financial assistance and additional information on farming.
- Small farmers need additional assistance. They need financial assistance and help with management, marketing, bargaining, and income projection.
- Most aren't looking realistically at the capability of their farm. Most overrate farm earning ability. One way to help them is on a one-to-one basis.¹

The Proposal

The Meramec Extension faculty and the University of Missouri Office of Rural Development put together a proposal called the "Agriculture Alternatives Program." The plan called for a broad survey of all rural residents to identify needs and interests that might be met by Extension. This survey was to be followed by the hiring of paraprofessionals in each county who would have a limited number of rural families for whom they would provide frequent, personal contacts.

Twice the project was proposed for small farm program funding, but those funds had already been committed.

Then Gentry found that such a proposal might be favorably received if funding were sought under Title VI, the Emergency Jobs Projects Funds, of the federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), administered through the state Office of Manpower Planning.

Drawbacks

But there were drawbacks. No funds would actually change hands. The Extension staff and Extension councils could select the personnel they wanted from an eligibility list, and use those employees, but they would be paid by the state for a stipulated time. The salary funds would be available only on a short-term basis for interviewers, and only for one year for the paraprofessionals. There was no assurance that other funds would become available to carry on the program.

Also, the use of CETA funds meant that two programs—Extension and CETA—would have to mesh, although each had different, but potentially complementary, goals. The Extension goals were to collect a data base by interviewing, and then initiate a long-term plan of help. But, the CETA program intended its funds to be used to teach unemployed

people skills that might better enable them to find a place in the job market, and thereby remove them from the list of unemployed.

Despite the fact that each agency had different reasons for being involved in the project, Extension councils in five counties voted to go ahead with the plan. So, the Extension faculty filed an application for funds to hire 25 surveyors for 13 weeks, followed by the hiring of 5 educational assistants and 1 secretary for a year after that.

Personnel

The proposal to the state Office of Manpower Planning was to train CETA eligible people from the target counties as interviewers and then use them to interview open-country residents in the region. Following the interviewing, the surveys would be analyzed and used as a basis for developing new programs to meet the needs expressed by Extension's new potential clientele.

The answer proved to be soft money—the kind of funds that many Extension managers have often steered clear of because of uncertainty over the future availability of such resources.

Interviewing

Although the small or part-time farmer was to be the primary focus of the research study, it was realized that there wasn't a very accurate basis for sampling this segment of the population because of the diversity of the open-country population in the region.² Consequently, the survey plan called for the interviewing of all open-country households. A short questionnaire was devised for open-country residents living on less than one acre of land, and a much longer form was developed for those living on more than one acre.

In addition, if a family were selling more than \$500 worth of agricultural produce a year, they were asked a supplemental set of questions about their farming activity. By interviewing all open-country residents, it was felt that the data would be useful to all publicly oriented organizations and agencies in the area. In addition, this procedure would also help to provide a locally relevant definition of the small farm instead of depending on census or other arbitrary definitions.

The project proposal was approved by the Office of Manpower Planning, and 23 people were hired from among a list of 50 provided by the area Employment Securities Office.

Each interviewer was trained for a week by various campus and area Extension faculty members. Actual interviewing began August 31 and ended November 15, 1977. Altogether, 3,611 open-country families were surveyed.

In addition to general demographic data, information was asked about energy shortages and costs, quality of life, and interest in crops that aren't commonly raised in the area now, but which experts have identified as being potentially profitable for the area.

At the end of the survey, five educational assistants were hired and trained to begin working with selected families in the region to show them how to use Extension programs that would fill their needs.

Extra Bonus

But, the survey effort met another goal—the CETA goal of helping program participants get other jobs. The federal funds used to hire survey workers and paraprofessionals are purposely limited to produce a turnover of people hired in such programs, with the hope that each job experience will result in increasing the employability of people who are funded through the CETA program.

At least 9 of the survey workers went on to other jobs—2 of them as Extension paraprofessionals in the long-range program that ends in November of 1978. Another was hired as a school teacher, one went to work in an automotive plant, one was hired as a secretary, and two went into full-time farming.

Summary

Certainly there have been problems. The regulations regarding who can be hired with CETA funds are relatively strict. And the time limitations imposed for hiring people with CETA funds may mean that Gentry will lose his staff members who have been running the special targeted program—if funds aren't extended past November, 1978.

"We don't have any assurance that the program will go past November," says Gentry, clearly unhappy about the prospect of losing six of his employees then. "But, we feel it has been worthwhile.

"We've provided help to 4,000 Meramec area families in attaining their goals, and we've provided a data base for 18 Extension faculty and 120 Extension advisory council people by conducting the survey.

"We've not only given people jobs, but we're helping lots of other people in many different ways.

"We've trained 26 different individuals with some lifelong skills so they can be gainfully employed in society," Gentry

says. "They'll have more of a choice of employment than a chance."

As a result of his venture with CETA funds, Gentry has become an advocate of the use of soft money to strengthen Extension programs. He has been so satisfied with the outcome *of the effort in his area that he has worked to acquaint other area directors with the availability of soft money funding and has encouraged them to take advantage of it.*

Since management with soft money seems to work in the Meramec area of Missouri, shouldn't you consider trying it? Could it be the means of financing some project you haven't been able to find money for elsewhere?

Footnotes

1. *Growth for Tomorrow: The Meramec Program Plan* (Rolla: University of Missouri, Extension Division, 1976).
2. *Surveying Community Attitudes* (Columbia: University of Missouri-Columbia and Missouri Division of Community Betterment, 1977).