

Research in Brief

MASON E. MILLER, *editor*

HOW TOUGH A COURSE? DEPENDS ON WHO YOU'RE TEACHING

With the increased use of "in-depth" training, some Extension work closely resembles classroom teaching. Should we give grades, too? Some recent research raises the intriguing possibility that for some people, this might be good—but for others, it wouldn't be successful.

Giving academic credit—and the grades that go with it—may reward the brighter students in Extension courses. But less-able participants often "drop out" of evening college credit courses once the possibility of a poor grade becomes apparent, a study by Zahn suggests.

In trying to fit these and other pieces of evidence together, Zahn came up with some intriguing, though tentative, thoughts for Extension workers.

The Study in Brief

The researcher gave a battery of tests to about 420 students—all college graduates enrolled in evening courses in business administration, engineering, public administration, and city planning. About half the students enrolled for credit. Credit and non-credit courses were similar as to subject area.

A student was considered a dropout if he missed three consecutive weekly class sessions without arranging to make up for missed work.

The researchers suspected highly-anxious people—fearful of failure—might be especially apt to drop out. Surprisingly, "dropouts" and "stay-ins" didn't differ as to personal anxiety level in either credit or non-credit courses. The Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale was the measuring device used.

Lumping all classes together, dropouts and students completing courses didn't differ as to mental ability (measured on the 90-item Hensen-Nelson Test). This seems surprising. However, results make more sense when we look at credit and non-credit classes separately: (1) In credit classes, low-ability students were most apt to drop out; (2) in non-credit classes, high-ability students most often failed to last the term.

Credit and non-credit classes did not attract students of differing ability at the start of the term. The author concludes the two types of

MASON E. MILLER is Director, Institute for Extension Personnel Development, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48823.

courses must have had different effects *after* the term began. Unfortunately, the data don't tell what these effects were.

Some Speculative Interpretations

The author mentions two possible explanations. One centers on the student, the other on the instructor.

First, a look at the *student*. No one likes to get a D or an F. The possibility of a low grade may threaten one's much-needed self-respect. The highly able student may look at things differently. He's apt to feel he can do well, which may be rewarding. And unlike the low-ability student, he'll probably get good quiz and exam grades during the term to strengthen his optimism.

This could account for low-ability students dropping out of credit courses and the high-ability ones staying in.

Second, the *instructor* may treat the two types of courses differently. He's apt to assume students in a non-credit course have low ability and motivation. He may pitch his lectures and assignments at a low level. This may bore the bright student while his less-able brethren breathe a sigh of relief—explaining the dropout of high-ability students and continuance of those less able.

Implications for Extension

The study seems to support several fairly widespread trends in Extension thinking and programs.

First, you can't aid learning in certain people by slapping them with low grades or confronting them with unrealistic demands on their learning abilities and interests. That's the thinking behind the current 4-H trend toward *self-evaluation* projects tailored to individual-member needs, abilities, and resources.

Second, you can't expect a watered-down educational program to hold and stimulate the curious and the well-informed. Extension men see this when they plead for more "in-depth," specialized courses rather than "shotgun" meetings.

Third, this research also makes a case for separating groups into various ability levels. High-ability people could be handled separately in a more competitive, in-depth training program. Lower-ability people might do best in a less-competitive, less threatening, learning situation and would want any in-depth training to start at a different level.

Jane Zahn, "Drop-outs and Academic Ability in University Extension Courses," *Adult Education*, XV (Autumn, 1964), 35-46. Abstracted by Johnson A. Ekpere, Hugh M. Culbertson, and Mason E. Miller.

KEY TO COMMUNITY CHANGE

Extension workers are "old hands" at belonging to groups. That's

part of their job. But how often do we assess just what each organization can do, will do, or can contribute to our doing our jobs? A recent study indicates the importance of certain types of voluntary organizations for bringing about change in a community, as well as for making helpful contacts in other communities.

Older, institutionalized, voluntary organizations can have a lot of impact on their communities, according to a recent study by Young and Larson. Such groups add *stability* by supporting tradition and customs. At the same time, they bring about far more *innovation* and *change* than most people realize. Thus, older, established groups may be strong potential allies for Extension.

The Study in Brief

Young and Larson first identified 43 formal voluntary organizations in a New York community of about 2,000 people. Each organization had at least 15 members, a name, and a place to meet.

Next step was to interview one major officer from each of the 43 organizations. Each officer then named and ranked the five most important organizations, in his opinion, within the community.

The analysis yielded at least three rather distinct kinds of voluntary organizations—each at its own level of importance or prestige. High-importance groups tended to be *administrative*; medium-importance groups tended to be *social*; and low-importance organizations did little but *entertain*.

High-importance groups included mainly churches, village business clubs, farm and home extension organizations, a youth group, farm fraternal clubs, and school-related groups. These high-importance groups had a number of distinguishing characteristics:

1. They were large. About half had 50 or more members each.
2. They often introduced community change. Changes studied included building a swimming pool and establishing new scout troops.
3. They often originated activities for other organizations. Lower-prestige groups seldom took the initiative in community-wide projects.
4. They had many communicative contacts outside the community. For example, they sent delegates to conventions and workshops more often than did lower-importance groups.
5. They tended to have a large number of officers, committees, and specialized functions. In short, they had fairly formal, elaborate structures.

Middle-importance groups were not simply “paler editions” of high-prestige organizations. Rather, the middle-importance groups had a completely different role. They stressed social, charity, and fraternal activities. In general, middle-importance groups focused much of their attention on internal affairs (i.e., recruiting members, indoctrinating the

young) rather than on the community at large. Contacts outside the community were not too common.

Low-importance groups tended to be small, generally focusing on entertainment. By and large, these groups were new or unstable.

Implications

Extension workers often join groups to make contacts and gain support for programs of change. Young and Larson suggest that social groups, like service clubs, may provide less mileage than commonly assumed, if the Extension worker is seeking help from and involvement of that group in significant community activities and changes. On the other hand, larger, more formalized groups such as the church may be largely untapped potential allies. Extension increasingly seems to work with organizations which have larger-than-county concerns, interests, and contacts. The high-importance voluntary organizations seem to be this kind of group. Thus, an Extension worker might turn to such groups early in getting contacts and support needed to set up and coordinate an area-wide, regional, or even state-wide program.

This study suggests that Extension workers ought to reassess what organizations they belong to for job purposes. Are these really the groups with greatest potential for bringing about community change and for helping the Extension worker as he or she moves into area programming?

Ruth C. Young and Olaf F. Larson, "The Contribution of Voluntary Organizations to Community Structure," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXXII (September, 1965), 178-86. Abstracted by Robert C. Stevenson, Hugh W. Culbertson, and Mason E. Miller.

THE RESTLESSNESS AND INDIFFERENCE of ordinary people in the presence of teachers and uplifters are more often due to the dullness of the speaker than the stupidity of the listeners. The number who will put themselves to pain and inconvenience to learn is limited. Just because a man has information does not mean that he has the ability to impart it. Unless he understands the art of presentation he may fail as a teacher, wise though he may be. No thought was ever so profound but that in the course of time some man was found who had the ability to express it so simply that the dullest could understand. When anything is over the head of an ordinary man, it's usually second-rate stuff or first-rate stuff poorly expressed.

—WILLIAM FEATHER