

# a unique way to get an ag degree

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Two recent graduates of the University of Missouri-Columbia College of Agriculture don't fit the mental picture most often associated with graduating seniors.

The first of these graduates is 50 years old, married with 4 children, a veteran of WWII, a full-time employe of the Soil Conservation Service, who hadn't been on the campus of the College of Agriculture as a student since leaving in 1948, with 113 hours of college credit.

The second is 29 years old, also married, with 3 children, a rural minister, who had last been a full-time student at the college in 1970, when he left to take a job as a farm manager. At that time, he had 72 hours of college credit.

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Despite differences in age, college hours, and occupations, these two graduates were similar in that both had the desire and motivation to complete requirements for the B.S. degree in agriculture. What had been a dream became a reality through the Nontraditional Study Program (NSP).

## **About NSP**

This program, partially funded by the Kellogg Foundation, was in the planning stages for over 2 years and students

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were first accepted in January, 1975. The Nontraditional Study Program is a program providing opportunity to adult farmers and agribusiness men and women to complete degree requirements for the B.S. degree in agriculture without returning to campus.

Learning opportunities are provided by a variety of methods and techniques including Extension courses, correspondence study, individualized courses, special problems, seminars in convenient locations, radio and TV courses, and newspapers. In addition, credit is awarded for documented prior learning of college level. The constraint of "time" as embodied in the traditional quarter or semester system found in almost all degree programs has been removed to allow fully employed, mature adults, to proceed at their own pace.

Several reasons may be found for beginning a new and different program such as the nontraditional program—the need for increased knowledge due to the increasing complexity of farming and other agribusiness, desire to serve other than the traditional "college age student," and concern over the decreasing number of "college age students." One of the major reasons that the University of Missouri-Columbia College of Agriculture began this program was to fill needs like those expressed in this letter:

In the fall of 1946, I enrolled in the College of Agriculture, majoring in poultry husbandry. I continued at the university through the fall of 1949, although I was excused from the university at one time.

I earned 94 credit hours before I had to leave the university. Marriage, a child, and inadequate finances made it seemingly impossible to continue on to graduation.

One of the major disappointments in my life is the failure to graduate. Although I have enjoyed moderate success in business, my life is incomplete, and I would like to rectify the situation.

## **NSP Students**

In the 2 years since the inception of NSP, over 70 students have been enrolled. They're a diverse group, but like the first 2 graduates, they have the desire and motivation to complete degree requirements. Presently, there are 7 women and 64 men enrolled. Sixty-seven of the students are married. Average age is 35, with a range of 22 to 61 years.

Six are farm homemakers, 29 are full-time farmers, and 35 hold jobs in agribusiness and agriservice areas. At the time of enrollment, they had an average of 73 hours of previous college credit.

One of the problems sometimes associated with programs involving independent study formats of various kinds is that of satisfactory progress. To date, this hasn't been a problem with NSP students. They have maintained a grade-point average of 3.3 on a 4-point scale.

### **Prior Learning Credit**

Credit may be awarded for documented prior learning of college level and relevant to the degree sought. As of this date, 38 students have been awarded prior learning credit and additional students are involved in documenting such learning. Hours of credit awarded has varied from a low of 2 hours to a high of 30.

### **Extension's Role**

Although the nontraditional program is an offering of the College of Agriculture, Extension professionals have played important roles in the development of the program. Extension specialists on the field staff have recruited students, helped publicize the program, served as on-the-site "mentors," arranged for facilities, and three Extension field staff professionals have served on the advisory committee for NSP.

Extension professionals have long known that student attitudes toward an educational program in which they're enrolled have much to do with the success of the program and with the individual successes of the students. With this in mind, staff of the Nontraditional Study Program of the University of Missouri-Columbia College of Agriculture, with help from continuing education specialists in several Extension program planning areas, undertook an attitude survey of 34 students enrolled in the program.

### **Student Attitudes**

The survey instrument was designed to determine student attitudes toward the program, toward the university and the personnel teaching and administering the program, and finally, toward themselves. In addition, three nonattitudinal items included on the survey were: (1) list in rank order your goals as related to participation in NSP, (2) what delivery methods you prefer for educational offerings of NSP, and (3) what you want to learn.

Overall, the findings of the survey indicated that students were very favorable in their attitude toward the program, the university, and themselves. On a scale where 5 represented the strongest possible favorable attitude, students had a mean of 4.07 for all 41 attitudinal items. Individual item mean varied, but some of the more significant items and their means are listed as follows:

Item	Mean
NSP is best viable alternative route to higher education for me.	4.44
NSP is helping me obtain my education goals.	4.62
I can obtain the competency level for the B.S. degree through NSP.	4.32
My life learning has been as valuable to me as formal schooling.	4.68
The University of Missouri is the logical institution to offer NSP.	4.41
Administrators of NSP are interested in assisting students.	4.61
Because of my involvement in NSP I have increased my own self-respect.	3.79
I will have a greater obligation to be of service to my community because of my involvement in NSP.	4.26

### **Student Goals**

On the open-ended items the students listed their goals in the following order:

1. To gain additional knowledge that will help me in my work and daily life.
2. To obtain a B.S. degree in agriculture.
3. To obtain the knowledge and skill "to be a better leader in my community."
4. To gain additional income.
5. To advance in my job.

### **How and What Students Want to Learn**

Students in NSP seemed to agree with adult learners in general as to preferred methods of delivery of educational information, ranking the various methods as follows:

1. Workshop/seminar (a tie).
2. Reading books.
3. Discussion classes.
4. Correspondence courses.
5. Lecture classes.
6. Audio tapes.
7. Educational television.
8. Radio.

Another open-ended question asked: What do you want to learn? Answers to this question were quite varied, but were grouped according to category in the following order:

1. Successful farm management, planning, and *efficiency in production.*
2. *General knowledge at the B.S. degree level to enable better decision making and to improve the life situation.*
3. Communication skills: writing/speaking/expression.
4. Leadership skills to improve citizenship roles.
5. Skills that lead to better living standards and to being better examples for my children.

## **Implications for Extension**

Although the students in this survey were enrolled for credit in a degree program and in general students (clients) with whom Extension personnel work aren't seeking college credit, there are many similarities. The NSP students are adults, working full time and seeking the fruits of additional education on a part-time basis.

Many of the students in the study have a long history of close association with Extension. Some are or have been chairman of county Extension Councils and many are members of councils. Almost all have been recruited for the Nontraditional Study Program by Extension field staff members.

It's likely that as innovative programs such as NSP grow in numbers of programs and in numbers of students, Extension field staff will play an increasingly important role—not only in the recruiting of students, but in roles designed to help in the teaching/learning process itself. Roles such as mentors, advisors of special problems, and assessors in the evaluation of prior learning for credit may well be roles Extension personnel will fill.

Beyond the possible expanded involvement of Extension staff in nontraditional programs, there are some obvious points of interest for Extension professionals in the attitudes revealed. The favorable attitude of students toward the College of Agriculture, to which many Extension staff have ties, can be used in further strengthening Extension programs.

The student attitudes toward community service obligations can also be useful to Extension specialists as they seek leaders in the community who are willing and capable of taking on and discharging new responsibilities. And finally, the information concerning how students like to obtain educational information should be very useful to Extension staff engaged in planning educational programs.