

economics in action: a program for youth

W. M. Garmon

D. G. Harwood, Jr.

The idea for the Economics in Action program was conceived at the 1972 National 4-H Congress. Prominent business leaders at the Congress were dismayed at the apparent apathy of today's youth about the business community. Youth were reported to feel that business was "ripping off" the consumer, business was unconcerned about pollution, business was exploiting labor, etc. There also surfaced the recognition that businessmen, on their part, hadn't communicated well with youth, that businessmen felt that youth blamed them for every unhealthy aspect of the economy. A survey of high school students conducted in the area of Apex, North Carolina, revealed that many students believed corporate profits averaged as high as 75%, and that a foreman's salary in a local plant was around \$3,000 per year!

Local community leaders expressed concerns that young people didn't understand the costs of and constraints on providing public services. The benefits of schools, police protection, parks, consumer protection, environmental health, etc., were obvious, but the costs were more difficult to grasp. Public officials feared youth viewed community services as free and unrelated to taxes or alternative opportunities foregone.

Much Staff Involvement

Following the 1972 National 4-H Congress, a 4-H specialist and an Extension economist at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, initially involved a few of the campus economics staff in establishing general program guidelines and identifying subject-matter content. The program has since grown to include many Extension agents, Chamber of Commerce officials, business leaders, youth representatives and others as various area and county Economics in Action programs are being planned.

W. M. Garmon: 4-H Specialist, North Carolina State University—Raleigh.
D. G. Harwood, Jr.: Extension Economist, Farm Management, North Carolina State University—Raleigh. Received for publication—November, 1975.

Module Concept

We suggest the module concept as the format for these programs. Each module takes about a day to complete and four modules are proposed: (1) economics in business (management and marketing); (2) economics in business (how do you build a business, and man and computers); (3) economics in the economy (money, this business of government, and international trade); and (4) economics in the community (economics of public services, and economics of pollution).

Local advisory committees are encouraged to use their own initiative and imagination in developing interesting and effective programs. But, essentially each module should: (1) prepare students for what they'll see during visits to businesses, (2) illustrate economic concepts in presentations at business firms, and (3) allow questions from students about what they saw and heard during these business visits.

Local community leaders expressed concerns that young people didn't understand the costs of and constraints on providing public services. . . .

Involving Businessmen

In keeping with the module concept, most Economics in Action programs begin each day with presentations by faculty or businessmen giving background and principles of particular relevance to the module for that day.

Typically, W. D. Toussaint, Head of the Department of Economics at North Carolina State, introduces the students to the economics of individual decisions. He stresses that there are substitutes for any want you may have. Intelligent individual choice among substitutes requires a balancing of additional costs against additional benefits.

Another faculty member may point out that managers combine people, resources, and tasks to produce valuable goods and services at low cost—that is, to make a profit. To make a profit, businesses must make products and provide services that are higher in value to the ultimate user than the cost of producing those goods and services.

Then, a prearranged tour is conducted to business firms where youths learn the day-to-day application of management principles already presented. For example, Westinghouse Corporation demonstrated the management decisions involved in developing, testing, producing, and marketing a new plastic electrical meter cover.

Later in the day, "buzz sessions" give youths a chance to ask questions.

Near the end of the program, a panel of businessmen, government officials, and others discuss "the ethics of business and government."

A 1974 *Journal of Extension* article included this excerpt:

Knowledge based on personal observation and experience is probably the most potent source of data, and the most difficult to disbelieve. On-site inspections, process and result demonstrations, experienced comparisons, and discovery learning fall in this category.¹

Thus, the involvement of businessmen and visits to businesses studied, we feel, are invaluable learning and use an available and competent resource.

An important key to involving businessmen has been the practice of having a luncheon before the Economics in Action program. During the luncheon, each businessman (or discussion leader) is given an opportunity to summarize what he'll cover in the program. This gives each businessman a better idea of total program content and his particular role.

Although so far each program has included 30-40 boys and girls each, there's nothing sacred about this number. Size of transporting vehicle and the number of people the firm's meeting room will hold are usually the limiting factors.

The cost of food, housing, and transportation for a 3-day program averages \$30 a student. Although scholarships have been available for some programs, requiring each student to pay at least part of his own expenses has some advantages.

Coordination Is Vital

The success of these programs isn't left to chance in North Carolina. An Extension economist is assigned as a coordinator and resource person to each group planning an Economics in Action program. A publication entitled *Economics in Action: Guidelines for a 4-H Youth Program*² is given to each advisory committee member. A leaflet, "Economics in Action," is presented to each delegate to these programs as a "take-home" reference. Video-taped presentations and slide-tape packages are available when businessmen or others aren't able or willing to present a desired topic. Mimeographed lecture outlines are available for speakers to use in preparing their discussions.

The primary objective of this program is to acquaint youth with the realities of their economic environment. . . .

Organizational Structure

Local advisory committees are encouraged to appoint other committees to implement the programs after general policies have been established. A steering committee, with an Extension agent as chairman, has primary responsibility for developing, implementing, and evaluating an Economics in Action program. A publicity committee, representative of the local mass media, is needed to tell the general public about the program and handle news coverage of the event, including

follow-up stories with students and features for house organs. A selection committee, including school system representatives, is needed for soliciting applications and selecting the participants. A logistics committee, including an Extension agent, has the responsibility for planning for meals, classroom space, transportation, housing, etc.

Results

The primary objective of this program is to acquaint youth with the realities of their economic environment. Evaluation suggests success. David Pickett of Durham, North Carolina, who attended the pilot Economics in Action program said,

I knew that the free enterprise system was complicated, but I had no idea of how complex it really is. Observing what occurs in the everyday life of a company made me realize that running a business is not as easy as it looks, and that the best management possible is required if the company wants to succeed and stay alive.

Business and community leaders have been quite enthusiastic about this program. Irvin R. Squires in keynoting the Greensboro program said,

Economics is a phenomenon in which each of us must participate throughout our lives. Participating successfully is the goal of each well-informed citizen. Through this Economics in Action program each of you will be given guidelines and ideas which, when put to practice in your daily lives, will give you a distinct advantage over the majority of people you'll meet.

Youth agents in counties are always busy and must assign priorities in allocating their time. Koelling and Lee say,

. . . But the university, with limitations in both personnel and finance, cannot be all things to all people. It has to decide, therefore, on what things it wants to be to what people. It cannot escape making a selecting response. The difficult task is to make such a response so as to be publicly understood and publicly defensible³

The Economics in Action program has a high potential value as a learning experience for youth, in broadening the image of Extension 4-H and youth programs and in improving relations with local business and community leaders. Economics in Action is publicly understood and is certainly publicly defensible.

Footnotes

1. William W. Reeder, Nelson L. LeRay, Jr., and Susan T. MacKenzie, "Planning Powerful Extension Programs," *Journal of Extension*, XII (Summer, 1974), 20-35.
2. J. E. Ikerd, R. D. Dahle, D. G. Harwood, Jr., and W. M. Garmon, *Economics in Action: Guidelines for a 4-H Youth Program* (Raleigh, N. C.: North Carolina Agricultural Extension Service, June, 1975).
3. Quoted in Charles Koelling and Richard Lee, "Institutional Future Shock in Extension," *Journal of Extension*, XIII (January/February, 1975), 6.