SUPervised Occupational Experience—The Challenge

By Dr. Floyd G. McCormick

At the very onset, I have taken the liberty to change the topic title from "SOE—A Challenge!" The rationale for this change is obvious. We all know that planning, conducting and evaluating quality Supervised Occupational Experience Programs is a challenge. However, I would like to dwell deeper into the topic by stating SOE is the challenge if we are to continue providing vocational education in agriculture in this country. It is my strong professional belief that without quality SOE programs, we do not have vocational education.

We must exert all our professional expertise to assure that vocational agriculture:

• is taught in an environment which duplicates the setting in which students desire to be employed.
• provides occupational experiences which utilize the same facilities, equipment, materials and processes as found in the occupation.
• be provided to only those individuals who need it, want it and can profit from it.
• provides instruction including supervised experiences to develop in the individual mental and manipulative skills, technical knowledge, work habits and leadership skills essential to succeed in the occupation.
• provides instruction of a sufficient duration to develop competent, reliable and responsible workers for the occupation.
• provides instruction that is timed so the individual can apply it at the time it is learned.
• is adequately financed and recognize there is a minimum cost below which effective programs cannot be provided.

If one agrees with the above seven principles, it becomes obvious the common denominator is Supervised Occupational Experience. In my opinion, if we tolerate anything less than a total commitment to SOEP, the only results in the long run will be self destruction. It should be obvious why I changed the title to "SOE—The Challenge."

Satisfying Student Needs

Let's discuss for a moment what "turns most students on." Today's students have many needs which influence their attitudes, drives, habits and goals. Most students are concerned with: making money, securing a job, doing something worthwhile, satisfying personal needs, seeking economic independence, developing self-confidence, obtaining job satisfaction, assuming responsibility, developing self esteem. Learning experiences which help students satisfy these basic needs will usually be readily acceptable. It is obvious students must become actively involved in a productive job, which provides both monetary and personal rewards if these needs are to be satisfied. Vocational agriculture helps students prepare for employment, including self employment. Through the use of teaching tools available in the total program of vocational agriculture, students are afforded the opportunity to gain real-life experiences by means of "learning by doing" which will satisfy some of their basic needs.

Deterrents to Employment

Teachers need to be especially aware of those barriers which handicap or prevent students from gaining employment in their areas of interest. Youth employment has always been rather difficult to achieve. As a result, one of the great national social problems is youth unemployment.

Logically, one might ask why so many youth unemployed? The answer lies in the numerous shortcomings students possess because of their age and lack of experience. Most students have not had the time nor the opportunity to: develop skills and abilities, gain occupational experience, develop reputations as workers, gain self-confidence, mature physically and mentally, save capital, explore career choices.

Students must be afforded the opportunity to overcome those shortcomings inhibiting employment opportunities. These deterrents must be met if students are to become productively employed in agricultural occupations.

Overcoming Deterrents

Youth found in the dilemma of satisfying their needs through employment on one hand and realizing their shortcomings on the other hand are often frustrated and unsure as to how to proceed.

Actual experience, coupled with acquired competencies in technical agriculture, is essential for successful employment. Occupational experience programs provide students with an opportunity to become occupationally involved in agriculture under the guidance and supervision of their vocational agriculture teachers, their parents and their employers. In the final analysis, the best way to prepare students for employment and (continued on Page 2)
overcome their employment limitations is through SUPERVISED OCCUPATIONAL EXPERIENCE. Supervised Occupational Experience was never more important than it is today to help youth become employable.

Bridging the Gap with SOE Program

One of the most interesting and challenging facets of the total vocational agriculture program is the SUPERVISED OCCUPATIONAL EXPERIENCE PROGRAM. Through SOE programs, students “learn by doing” by applying those agricultural competencies studied in the classroom to a practical, useful occupational experience and thus “bridging the gap” between their needs and goals.

SOE programs must be structured in such a way to provide for the development of occupational skills and, at the same time, provide an opportunity for students to gain experience in their particular occupational area of interest. Students in vocational agriculture must gain experience in agriculture in a setting as nearly identical to that in which they desire to be employed. Furthermore, students need to remain in the “supervised experience” setting long enough to learn the mental and manipulative skills and habits needed for employment and also develop reputations as reliable and responsible workers.

As illustrated, the various types of SOE provide the “planking” for the bridge.

It is SOE programs which help “bridge the gap” between where students are and where they want to be. SOE programs help students develop leadership and economic skills, gain actual occupational experience, secure economic independence, explore career opportunities, develop responsibility, learn by doing, earn money, become employable.

The Key Is The Teacher

This is all well and good. But we must discuss briefly the key ingredient—that being the teacher. It is my opinion the quality of any program is directly proportionate to the quality of the teacher and the degree of community involvement generated by that teacher.

Who is the successful teacher? It is my judgment the successful teachers are those who function as good vocational educators. How?

- Their lessons have utility.
- Their instructional programs are designed to develop agricultural competencies in their students.
- They assist students find employment and become successful workers.
- They relate instruction to occupational experience programs.
- They support the principles of vocational education.

Assuming we have a successful teacher and community involvement, what long term results can we expect?

1. A high percentage of the students are gainfully employed, effective workers in agriculture, effective leaders.
2. The results of the instructional program are reflected in the improvement in economic efficiency, productivity, organization and management of the farms, firms and industries within the community.
3. Students are assisted to meet their educational and employment goals and assume their role in society.

The Teacher’s Responsibility to SOE

The contribution that SOE programs can make to assist students become employable in agriculture is not automatic. However, the potential is great if the program is structured to provide a means for overcoming the shortcomings of students. Much of this potential rests with the teacher. Vocational agriculture teachers have a critical role to play in helping students “bridge the gap.” In addition to helping students understand their shortcomings as future employees and owner-operators of agricultural businesses, teachers have major responsibilities in guiding each student as he/she selects, plans and develops occupational experience programs in agriculture.

The teacher must assist students:
- to select the best possible program of occupational experience which will help them overcome their “shortcomings” and satisfy their needs.
- to plan how they will carry out the occupational experience program before it begins, including budgeting and financial planning.
- to carry out their SOE programs by actual supervision and class instruction to assure positive experiences for the student.
- to evaluate the outcome of the SOE program and to replan so the student can gain new and different occupational experiences and agricultural competencies.

By fulfilling these four responsibilities, the teacher provides the “handrail” on the bridge to assist students secure the most benefits from their SOE programs.

Minimum Requirements

If SOE programs are to become effective teaching tools to help students become employable, there are minimum requirements which must be provided by teachers by the local school if they are to fulfill their responsibilities of selecting, planning, supervising and evaluating SOE programs. These are: Extended contract for year-round supervision, reporting system of achievements, one-on-one supervisory visits, one period of released time for supervision, complete student SOE records, follow-up on program completers, travel resources for individual student supervision.

Without minimum student and program standards, the effectiveness of SOE programs to help students “bridge the gap” will be hampered.

In summary, the quality of any vocational agricultural department will be directly proportionate to the quality of the SOE program, individually and collectively. The teacher is the key! SOE programs are vital tools to help us accomplish our mission. Without quality SOE programs, we cannot or should not call ourselves VOCATIONAL.

To be truly vocational in intent and design, each of us must:
- believe in the importance of SOE programs.
- be fully committed to the SOE program concept.
- teach students about SOE programs and how they will benefit them.
- require participation in SOE programs by students.
- have students keep neat, complete and accurate SOE records.
- utilize FFA incentives to motivate and recognize student accomplishments.

Excerpts of Opening Address delivered at the National SOE Workshop held in Washington, D.C. on July 26, 1982.
How do the future forest landowners in Alabama learn how timber should be managed? One way is through the Future Farmers of America program (FFA) offered in our local junior and senior high schools. Throughout the school year, these students study forestry as part of the FFA program. They complete basic courses in forest management, tree planting, and marketing along with ones covering the multiple use aspects which include wildlife management and recreation.

The first warm spring days bring these students out of the classroom and give them a chance to sharpen the skills they learned with practical experience. Teams compete in county and district contests, eliminating all but the best. The reward for all this work is the opportunity for the winning teams to attend the Annual FFA Convention in Montgomery and compete in the FFA Forestry Judging Contest. This is the day they have been preparing for all year. One team will have the opportunity to prove that it is the best in the state.

In the fall of 1974, the Alabama Forestry Commission and Alabama Forestry Association met with the Agribusiness section of the Department of Education. Aware of the tremendous interest shown by the FFA students in the forestry portion of their studies, they wanted to develop a state contest that would both encourage this interest and reward the best students for their efforts. After much work by everyone in the group, a contest was developed that would be challenging and fun for the students. In 1975, the first annual FFA Forestry Judging Contest was held at the Annual FFA Convention in Montgomery with the Alabama Forestry Association furnishing the prizes. Each spring, as the weather warms up, local representatives of forest industry, the Alabama Forestry Commission, and other state agencies work with the local FFA chapters helping them set up and conduct county and district contests. This gives the students the opportunity to practice what they learned in the classroom and also to get acquainted with the local foresters who can give them advice and assistance in managing their families' forestland.

The contest consists of three parts, each one developed to test the skills of the students in a particular area of forest management. The first part of the contest is timber cruising. Trees are measured to obtain an estimate of the amount of forest products that might be derived from them. This skill is needed to get an idea of what volume is present on a tract of timber. All forest properties must have some estimate of total volume, volume per acre and volume by product so that the forest manager can decide the course of his future actions. The students measure all trees on a one-fifth acre plot and convert the measurements to volume per acre.

The second part of the contest consists of two closely related problems for the students to solve. The first exercise is in Timber Stand Improvement (TSI). Exercising proper judgment in removing poor quality trees from a timber stand at the right time is essential to the overall health, vigor, and value of the forest. Twenty trees are selected to represent a timber stand that needs either thinning or some TSI. The students are given a "situation" concerning the forest management objectives of this imaginary stand.

Information that will help the teams with their decisions will include such things as wildlife habitat considerations, markets, present condition of the stand and the final goal of the management plan. With this information the students will decide if each of the twenty trees should be removed, left, or deadened. The second problem in this part of the contest deals with the fact that many farm woodlands in Alabama have been "high-graded" during previous harvests, often leaving inferior species of little market value. Sometimes it is necessary to harvest all merchantable timber, site prepare the land, and replant a stand of desirable trees. The students are given an area and must decide whether to continue managing it or clearcut, site prepare, and plant the area.

The third part of the contest gives the students three additional problems. To manage forestland one must not only know the volume of timber present, but also know what species are present. The students are given ten species of trees to identify. Trees and wildlife have been called the "twin crops" of forest management. Wildlife must have food, cover, water, and freedom from excessive disturbances. The managed forest provides each of these in abundance, but most species of wildlife have their own special habitat needs. The students are shown an area and must decide if the habitat is good, fair, or poor for several species of wildlife.

The final problem in this part of the contest is the determination of the site index or the area. This is a measure of soil productivity and future growth potential. It can be used as an excellent management guide in order to gain the highest economical return from the forest.

The training in Agribusiness Education received by many high school students in Alabama, along with the opportunity to test their skills in this forestry judging contest, is assuring us that the younger generation will appreciate Alabama's greatest renewable natural resource. They will also have the knowledge needed to manage it wisely. From this group of high school students will come our future TREASURE Forest managers. Reprint from Alabama's Treasured Forests Winter Issue 1983
The Auburn Collegiate FFA Chapter is involved in many local, state, and national FFA events. The Collegiate FFA Chapter regularly attends and assists with the Alabama State FFA Convention and state contests. Recently, the chapter partially sponsored members who attended the National FFA Convention in Kansas City, Missouri, where they assisted in administering some of the national contests. This was a most valuable educational experience for these future teachers of vocational agriculture.

The Chapter is involved in many local projects that will be reported in future issues. A most gratifying experience for members recently was a chapter sponsored tour for 36 pre-school students of the Livestock Research and testing facilities at Auburn University. The purpose of the tour was to bring about a greater understanding of the fields of agriculture for these urban youngsters while developing a better understanding of preschool students by Chapter FFA members. The FFA members were entertained by the many questions presented them by these preschoolers.

The success of this activity should be an incentive for the Collegiate FFA as well as local FFA Chapters to get involved in their communities. Events such as this provide an opportunity for people in agriculture to put their best foot forward in favorably showing off our profession. In these times agriculture needs the goodwill of all of society and all of us must be involved in bringing about this goodwill and selling agriculture.

**FFA SWEETHEART**

Joanne Marks, a 16-year-old junior at Lauderdale County High School, is the Rogersville FFA Chapter Sweetheart. Joanne is a member of FHA, Pep Club and VICA. She enjoys basketball, bowling, outdoor sports, cooking and sewing. Advisor to the Rogersville Chapter is Ross Smith.

**NEWS FROM THE COLLEGIATE CHAPTERS**

AU Collegiate FFA members, Robert Youngblood, Tony Watkins and Jerry Chenault, assisted in moving and pinning hogs during the State Jr. Market Hog Show held in Birmingham during January 1983. These future teachers of vo ag are getting first-hand experience in a phase of ag production.

**PUBLIC INFORMATION CLUB**

The FFA Advisors shown above have been cited by the Alabama Vocational Agriculture Teachers Association for having conducted an outstanding publicity program. These teachers had at least six, and up to 35 newspaper articles published during one school year. The recognition was made during the annual Teachers Conference. Displaying their certificates are advisors (l-r) Darwin Siniard, John Sims, Turner Porter, Billy Hines, Clayton Spencer, H. J. Beans, W. L. Shackelford, G. L. Gipson, Tommy Odom, Rex Mayfield, Lloyd Borden, E. W. Underwood, Ross Smith, Randall Hayes, Larry Justice, Andrew McCay, Alton Culp, and Billy Bryan.