

# The Blind Man, the Elephant, and Agricultural Education

By Gary Moore

There were six men of Indostan  
To learning much inclined,  
Who went to see the elephant  
(Though all of them were blind),  
That each by observation  
Might satisfy his mind.

The first approached the elephant,  
And, happening to fall  
Against his broad and sturdy side,  
At once began to bawl,  
"God Bless me! But the elephant  
Is very like a wall."

The second, feeling of the tusk  
Cried, "Ho, what have we here,  
So very round and smooth and  
sharp?

To me 'tis mighty clear,  
This wonder of an elephant  
Is very like a spear!"

The third approached the animal,  
And happening to take  
The squirming trunk within his  
hands,  
thus boldly up and spake:  
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant  
Is very like a snake."

The fourth reached out an eager  
hand,  
And felt above the knee;  
"What most this wondrous beast is  
like  
Is mighty plain" quoth he,  
"'Tis clear enough the elephant  
Is very like a tree."

The fifth who chanced to touch the  
ear,  
Said: "E'en the blindest man  
Can tell what this resembles most  
Deny the fact who can,  
This marvel of an elephant  
Is very like a fan!"

The sixth no sooner had begun  
About the beast to grope,  
Than, seizing on the swinging tail  
That fell within his scope,  
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant  
Is very like a rope."

And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong!

*The Blind Men and the  
Elephant, John G. Saxe*

## *The Purpose of Agricultural Education*

If one were to ask six guidance counselors, principals, or people on the street corner about the purpose of agricultural education, one might get as many answers as the men who felt of the elephant. Even those in the profession may have a difference of opinion about the purpose of agricultural education. Let's explore some of the possible answers we might get.

The purpose of agricultural education is to prepare people for work. The Smith-Hughes Act, the founding legislation for our field clearly stated in regards to vocational agriculture, "the controlling purpose of such education shall be to fit for useful employment." Furthermore, this is the primary purpose identified in the national mission statement for agricultural education, "Agricultural education prepares students for successful careers and a lifetime of informed choices in the global agriculture, food, fiber, and natural resources systems" (The Council, 2004). So it is very plain that the purpose of agricultural education is to prepare people for work.

The purpose of agricultural education is to reinforce academic skills and prepare students for higher education. In the opening section of the President's plan for the reauthorization of the Perkins legislation, one finds the statement, "...every U.S. student needs to complete high school with a high level of academic skills and be prepared to take advantage of education and train-

## THE PURPOSES OF AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION

- ◆ To prepare people for work
- ◆ To reinforce academic skills and prepare students for higher education
- ◆ To serve special needs students
- ◆ To promote agricultural literacy
- ◆ To promote the development of leisure time
- ◆ To provide an alternative for students who do not do well in school

ing beyond high school.” (United States Department of Education, 2004) Clearly the administration believes the purpose of secondary vocational education is to help teach academic skills and get students ready for post-secondary education where they can learn work skills.

The purpose of agricultural education is to serve special needs students. The Carl Perkins Act of 1984 called for 57% of the state allocations for vocational education to be spent on special populations. Vocational education was specifically directed to work with the disadvantaged, handicapped, adults who need retraining, single parents, displaced homemakers, and the incarcerated. This legislation coupled with the IDEA Act (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) of 1975, which brought about mainstreaming has shifted the focus of vocational education to serving special populations.

The purpose of agricultural education is to promote agricultural literacy. In 1988 the National Research Council’s report, *Understanding Agriculture: New Directions for Education*, suggested, “all students should receive at least some systematic instruction about agriculture beginning in kindergarten or first grade and continuing through twelfth grade.” With the changing demographics of America and the fact that less than two percent of the population lives on farms, this is where agricultural education needs to focus its efforts.

The purpose of agricultural education is to promote the development of leisure time interests (avocational skills). Some students enroll in agricultural education to learn more about flowers, horses, agricultural mechanics, etc. They do not plan to pursue careers in these areas nor study them in college. Yet, they enjoy the content

and may use what they learn as a hobby. This is certainly a legitimate reason for taking an agricultural course.

The purpose of agricultural education is to provide an alternative for students who do not do well in school. Can you spell D-U-M-P-I-N-G G-R-O-U-N-D? Unfortunately, there are some educators who believe that agricultural education is a dumping ground for the incorrigible, unmotivated, troublemakers of the school. What makes the matter worse is that some agriculture teachers operate agricultural education programs that reinforces this notion!

The real question is does Agricultural Education have to be one or the other or should it be all of the above (with the possible exception of the last

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Gary Moore is a Professor at North Carolina State University

## November – December 2004 Issue

### Theme: Professional Measurement

As a teacher, how do I know that I am making a difference in the profession? What can I use as a teacher to show that I am making a difference to the students that I teach? How can I as a teacher, verify to my administrators, that my program is of high quality? How does a beginning teacher, as opposed to a veteran teacher, begin to manage his/her time to ensure that all aspects of the program are carried out, yet still have personal time?

Theme Editor: MeeCee Baker  
R. D. #2, Box 2125  
Port Royal, PA 17082  
Email: [baker@pa.net](mailto:baker@pa.net)  
Phone: (717) 527-2050

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