

AAACE and Independence - One Member's Opinion

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Abstract

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AAACE and Independence— One Member's Opinion

R. E. (Gene) Stevenson

INDEPENDENCE is almost a sacred word to Americans, especially in the bicentennial year of 1976. And independence should be a major concern of AAACE. Just as the United States could not have reached its current level of greatness without independence, neither can AAACE fulfill its potential for service unless it remains free from outside influence.

Keeping AAACE's independence—or recovering it where erosion has occurred—requires some of the “eternal vigilance” that is the recognized price for liberty. The big need is to recognize potential pitfalls and avoid them, or to recognize where minor changes or emphases could be used to improve AAACE's independent standing.

It is critical that AAACE be recognized and operated as an organization of individual agricultural communicators, completely independent of the agencies for whom members work. Members of AAACE are members because they choose to pay their dues and band together with other professionals in mutual efforts to improve the profession. Each member has an equal vote, regardless of his employer or level of authority in that institution. This type of independence offers each member an equal opportunity for involvement.

Areas of Concern

Three major areas of concern seem obvious: (1) possible influence or dictation from our employing institutions, whether land-grant colleges or USDA agencies; (2) attempts by outside agencies or groups to “deal with” our employers through AAACE; and (3) the image that AAACE is an organization of editorial “offices,” rather than a group of individuals. Let me cite some examples.

Tie-in with Employers

At the 1974 AAACE meeting at Purdue, a regional agricultural experiment station director showed up at the business meeting to enlist the organization's help in publicizing the coming celebration of the centennial

of U.S. agricultural experiment stations. What happened? The members were more interested in discussing plans for the 1975 meeting in Hawaii, so our visitor was largely ignored. Months later he stated that he was "through with AAACE since they were just interested in going to Hawaii." Now I'm an experiment station editor and was vitally interested in the centennial celebration, but I'm firm in my belief that AAACE was not obligated to hear anyone or do anything. We were no more obligated to this event than was the Poultry Science Association or American Society of Agronomy. I doubt that our friend made such demands on these groups, so he obviously felt that we were an arm of the state land-grant colleges. Other examples are available, but this one will serve to illustrate the point.

Damage Mostly Self Implicated

More often than not, we do the damage ourselves. Actions such as conducting AAACE business at editors' workshops can do nothing except demonstrate a tie-in with the agency involved. I'm a little skeptical of the report coming from the 1975 Winter board meeting encouraging us to work with the National Association of County Agricultural Agents in their contests. Would we do the same for Contests by SCS Conservationists?

Something that has long bugged me is how the *Extension Editor's Letter* has served as the official organ for announcing AAACE activities, regional meetings, national meetings, etc. I finally got on the mailing list through kindness of Walter John, so I could keep up to date, but many AAACE members do not get it. We have our own communications system (newsletter, state representatives, regional newsletter) that should inform members about what's happening in the organization, so *every member* will be informed. This is not to criticize Ovid Bay. His letter should inform extension editors about items of interest, and this certainly includes AAACE events. The same is true for CSFS, ARS, AMS, or other agency newsletters. But the idea that reporting in the *Editor's Letter* is adequate leaves a lot of members on the outside looking in.

The image of AAACE being an organization of state editors and their staffs was a millstone around our neck for a long time, but I see a lot of progress here. Until a couple of years ago, entries in the critique and awards contest were made in the name of a state. More often than not, I suspect, the best thing put out by an office was the entry whether prepared by a member or non-member—not much incentive for a person to join. Now entries are made in the name of a member, or a group of members who work together, and the winning member gets credit for his work. This is in accordance with the rules down through the years, which said "any AAACE member may enter."

This "state editor membership syndrome" has been largely responsible for past complaints about only department heads and "old timers" being

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elected to positions of leadership. With AAACE seemingly run by head editors, nominations and elections seemed to follow that lead. Happily this is not true, and has not been in recent years. Our current president is not a department head (at time of this writing). Neither is the vice-president and more than half of the directors. Even I served a term as director, and I'm a member of a minority—full-time experiment station editor—as well as being well down the rank ladder.

The AAACE state representative program has served to decentralize AAACE authority on state staffs, but it hasn't gone far enough. The problem here is that on-campus members get the word, but others are slow in being informed. Members from other agencies often respond to my questions about their participation in upcoming meetings, for instance, with "I haven't heard anything about it." This is simply an oversight on the part of some state reps who fail to recognize that there are members other than those at their home institution, but it's the kind of oversight that could lead affected members to think they are less than full-fledged members.

Outside Agencies Sometimes Involved

Outside groups sometimes try to deal with our agencies, or specific groups of employees, through AAACE, as if the organization were a part of our employers. An example is a grant study program that was offered by the National 4-H Foundation a few years ago. It was presented to the AAACE board as something available to all members, when it actually was applicable and open only to 4-H editors on state extension staffs. There's no question that the program should have been for that specific group, but the decision to cooperate was one that should have been made by state extension directors, not AAACE board members. The board voted approval for the program only if open to all members as stated in the announcement. Unfortunately, the notices from the Foundation had already gone out to the specific people involved and, despite board action, it went merrily along as an AAACE program.

Free Rides Part of Problem

Much of our apparent existence as an arm of the land-grant colleges has resulted from piggy-backing AAACE functions on official business to get administrative approval for travel. This hasn't fooled our administrators, of course, and has held back our acceptance as a full-fledged professional organization such as our associates in other fields have enjoyed. Administrators often equate AAACE meetings with editor workshops, and they may fund traveling to only one. When this happens, the workshop generally takes precedence.

An outstanding example of piggy-backing is the mid-winter AAACE board meeting held every year in conjunction with the National 4-H

Congress in ~~China of Applied Social Communication members, as by by 1961~~ get appointed to the press coverage committee for the Congress, which gets travel authorized for this rather than for the board meeting. Administrators should be willing to send their elected staff members to AAACE board meetings, and I'm convinced they will once we make a case for it and quit piggy-backing it. If we treat AAACE business as a step-child that doesn't deserve "child status," you can be sure our bosses won't upgrade it.

The question now is: Will any president make the bold move of setting the meeting at a time that has nothing to do with our employing institutions? When I was nominated for office a couple of years back, I wondered if I would have the nerve, should I be elected and move up the ladder to president. Your vote relieved me of that decision, so I can't say what I would have done. But the move should be made, and it would be a real blow for independence.

Missed Opportunities

Down through the years there have been some golden opportunities for strengthening AAACE's independence, some of which have been seized and others missed.

One of the great battles was waged years ago when a strong push was made by members in one state to name their director as winner of the Reuben Brigham Award, in direct contradiction to objectives and rules. Can you imagine the annual fight that would have occurred as each experiment station, extension, and agency editor felt the necessity to get this honor for his boss? We owe thanks to the gallant fight waged against that power play.

But it was a different story some 15 or 20 years ago when a move was on to upgrade *ACE Magazine* into a professional journal for agricultural communicators exclusively. Instead, "these plans were shelved to shift support behind the proposed Journal of Cooperative Extension to be published at the National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study at the University of Wisconsin" (quotes are from *AAACE Origin and Development*). This decision, which said in effect that AAACE is aligned with Extension Service, certainly made no contribution to the organization's independence. We still have an official AAACE representative on the board of that journal. I was generally shouted down at a board meeting a few years ago when I dared question the propriety of this alignment.

Much Progress Apparent

Significant progress has been made in recent years. Seldom do we hear members preface their AAACE meeting talks with the phrase, "we in

extension," which said AAACE was really a part of extension. No longer do leaders in our profession write in the quarterly as one did in 1946 on the topic of "What is the Agricultural Editor?" saying, "The scope of the editor's work has broadened considerably in recent years. No longer does he report each news item separately without considering its relationship to the entire *Extension program*" (italics the author's). Nowadays, most seem to recognize that AAACE member and agricultural communicator are not synonymous with extension editor.

The resistance to develop sections in AAACE for each employee group has played an important role in strengthening AAACE in recent years. Programs are being developed to appeal to professional communicators, not to experiment station, ARS, or extension editors. This is the kind of independent operation that we must continue to have for future growth.

A few years ago I was invited to join in an experiment station editors program to run concurrently with AAACE national since, it was said, "the AAACE program will have nothing for us." I could not join such an undertaking. It would have hurt AAACE and our efforts to make programs applicable to all groups of professionals. Last year the Southern Research Communicators Work Group talked about inviting southern regional AAACE to meet with us. We decided it would be a risk to AAACE independence to get together with a group that is sponsored by our directors solely to deal with information programs of state experiment stations. We theorized that AAACE's efforts at improving the overall profession would be of great benefit to research reporting programs, but that we should not be approaching this on the basis of specific experiment station programs.

Constant Attention the Answer

What's the answer to continued progress, and I emphasize the word continued? Mainly an awareness of what AAACE is and what it stands for — a frame of mind, really. When we make decisions about AAACE activities, meetings, or projects, we need to remember that our employee group is only one of several represented. We need to overcome the natural tendency to feel that anything related to our work—whether experiment station, extension service, USDA agency, or whatever—is worthy of AAACE attention and involvement. We must keep individual members at the forefront in all activities, don't allow "state memberships" to creep backmake sure that all members are equally informed about what's going onkeep outside groups from using AAACE for their own endssell AAACE to our directorsdon't resort to free rides on official functions.

AAACE can stand alone if we let it.