

2006 R.J. Hildreth Lecture
National Public Policy Education Conference

“Public Policy Education: The Key to Civil Civic Engagement”

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When Barry Flinchbaugh (Kansas State) presented the inaugural Hildreth lecture in 2003 at Salt Lake City he mused “that it is dangerous to call anything the first annual in case a second one is never held.” I’m pleased that the Farm Foundation and the National Public Policy Education Committee has supported the continuance of the series. Hal Harris, Clemson University, presented the second Hildreth lecture in 2004 in St. Louis at which I was honored to be the recipient of the R.J. Hildreth Award. Fred Woods, retired USDA/CSREES administrator presented the third lecture in Washington, D.C. in 2005. I’m deeply honored and humbled to be asked to present the fourth lecture. Let me extend my thanks and appreciation to the Farm Foundation especially Walt Armbruster, Steve Halbrook, Mary Thompson and the rest of the Foundation staff and Board of Directors for their continued support of the national public policy conference and continuance of the lecture series. I would be remiss in not thanking the National Public Policy Education Committee for their dedication and contribution for carrying the torch and providing in-service training opportunities for policy educators in the land grant system. The Hildreth award holds special meaning for public policy educators since Dr. Hildreth was a model policy educator. While I carry the zeal and enthusiasm for public policy education, I’m afraid I’m not as witty as Dr. Hildreth who always left us pearls of wisdom at each of the conferences.

I cannot boast that I have attended every national public policy conference since I began my public policy work in 1971. In fact my first conference I attended was in Kennebunkport, ME in the 1980’s at which I was asked to present a workshop and paper. It was at the conference that I realized I was missing a great in-service training opportunity. I was familiar with the output of the conference and its contributing

scholarship through the “Increasing Understanding of Public Problems and Policies”, an annual proceedings publication from the national conference. Long time policy educators and scholars at MSU such as Art Mauch, Jim Shaffer, Jim Bonnen, Vern Sorenson and Larry Libby used the materials from the conference and Farm Foundation sponsored task forces in the classroom and in the field. I found the output of both the conference and the regional and national task forces to be a valuable contribution to the scholarship of public policy education. In my early professional career as a policy educator I was envious of colleagues who were designated to serve as representative to regional committees and attend the conference each year. It was customary at the time to limit the number of attendees from universities, a practice that has since changed. My colleagues who attended in those early years of my career upon their return from the conference would share stories and output of the conference; I soon realized that if I was going to continue to program in the public policy education I needed to make the national public policy conference a priority. I’m sure others in this room and previous attendees share the same assessment as I do, that the National Public Policy Conference is the key in-service training and professional development activity for policy educators each year. Those of you attending the conference for the first time, I encourage you to utilize the materials and scholarship emanating from this conference and other publications of the Farm Foundation and the various task forces, they are an excellent reference source. Over the years I have utilized the materials in the classroom for undergraduates as well as in-service training for extension staff. If you have not done so, visit the Farm Foundation’s website and review previous Hildreth lectures, both Flinchbaugh and Harris provide sage

advice to policy educators. The site also contains presentations from previous conferences.

I struggled with a title for the Hildreth lecture and ended up with the present title, “Public Policy Education: The Key to Civic Engagement”, not original I admit but it captures some key points that I wish to leave with attendees. I just finished listening to an unabridged version of former President Jimmy Carter’s novel titled The Hornets Nest, a story of the Revolutionary War from a southern perspective. Despite the limitations on travel and communication, one cannot help to be impressed with how individuals traveled great distances and sacrifice to engage in civic debate about the position that the fledgling colonies should assume in response to the growing conflict between Great Britain and the emerging American colonies. Oh, to have such dedication and commitment in our public discourse today. While our forefathers traveled days to engage in political discussions we as a nation have a challenging task of engaging citizens in the discussions of issues facing our nation, state and communities. We as citizens have been willing to accept plurality as the standard decision rule versus engaging a majority of citizens in decisions. Traveling to city hall or designated voting location has become a task engaged by fewer and fewer citizens. Students for example can recite from memory the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution but cannot find their way to the city hall or county building. As one observes political debate, and I use the term “debate” quite loosely since informed debate of issues is a rarity while vitriolic attacks of one’s opponent or position is the common approach, even the most causal observer of the political scene would agree that “civility” and “informed” are seldom part of the equation be it at the national or state level. Citizens seek “bumper sticker solutions” to complex societal problems.

As public policy educators at land grant universities we have the challenge, and I might add the responsibility to provide the intellectual leadership and educational programming for the general public and our extension colleagues, be they on campus or at our many county extension offices. Public policy education happens by design, not by chance. Public policy education happens not by edict but by policy educators understanding and embracing the concept that informed debate is based on solid analysis of the alternatives and consequences of various choices. Maintaining administrative support for public policy education is often difficult due to turnover of key extension administrators, changing department chairs and deans. It seems that every decade a refocusing and reenergizing is required in order to maintain the synergy of public policy education. The National Committee on Extension Programs (ECOP) has endorsed public policy education with a 1979 task force report and reaffirmed the commitment in a 1991 document. The Farm Foundation has always been at the center of securing administrative support for public policy education, even in the face of resistance expressed by some land grant administrators. The committed efforts of our predecessors and the current cadre of trained policy educators have provided the opportunities and support for public policy education that we enjoy today. But will we survive as a community of interest? I use the term “community of interests” since we as a group represent a broad set of academic disciplines but we share a common goal of embracing public policy education.

Just as local communities need to constantly re-stock the leadership pool in the communities, we in the public policy profession need to make sure that we restock the human capital at our institutions. Budget cuts, retirements and downsizing have left

fewer of us in the public policy education profession yet the demand and need for public policy education remains at a high level.

As educators we all are involved in policy education as pointed by Dr. Jim Hildreth in 1980 at the Southern Regional Public Policy Education Workshop in Mississippi when he stated “All education, in one way or another involves public policy issues. This statement has become more clear in recent years. Many of the topics which used to be considered objective technical subject matter are now policy issues... Thus, whether you want to be in policy education or not, you are.”¹

Public policy educators need to be resilient for the opportunity to be criticized abound and if you stay in this business long enough there are always folks that would rather see you retired. At several different points in my public policy education career, college and university administrators received requests from disgruntled citizens or public officials that I should be fired or at least confined to campus due to my educational programming and applied research. I have been fortunate to have had consistent support from central administration even when the issues have been thorny such as tax reform, agriculture citing, zoning and consolidation of services and political entities. But it is the difficult policy issues that provide the opportunity for policy educators to add to the civil discourse. In fact, I would argue that it was the willingness of extension policy educators to engage in research, analysis and scholarship addressing sensitive and controversial topics that has strengthened the support for public policy education, at least at my home institution. This support emanates from our university President to Deans and Directors.

¹ Barrows, Richard., “Public Policy Education: Key Concepts and Methods,” North Central Regional Extension Publication, page 2, circa 1980.

We all know that capturing the teachable moment yields dividends to both the policy educator and the institution. Most seasoned policy educators can point to watershed moments in their careers when tackling a controversial issue served to bolster the visibility of extension and built political capital at the institution. But to be fair, I should add that dealing with some of the issues no doubt gave gray hairs to some administrators who were thin skinned. In the past thirty years, public policy education got a boost at MSU due to three key policy issues. This is not to infer that policy specialist in Ag Economics were not engaged in policy education prior to these events. First was the Supreme Court ruling on “one person – one vote” in 1967 that reshaped legislative districts based on population including county boards of supervisors or commissioners. My former colleague Al House captured the teachable moment and instituted the new county commissioner training program, a program that has been sustained for 38 years and I’ve been proud to be a part of the program since 1976. Little did we all know that 30 years later with the advent of term limits, how important the training of county officials would be since a significant number of legislators now come from the ranks of county and township officials.

The second teachable moment arrived in 1978 concurrent with tax revolt efforts that spread from the outgrowth of Proposition 13 in California. In November 1978, Michigan voters faced eleven constitutional reform measures including three that would drastically change the tax system in the state consistent with the Jarvis approach in California. We decided early in 1978 that we needed to develop an aggressive policy education program complete with the “alternative and consequences” analysis of all the constitutional issues. We needed to train field staff in both public policy education and

the ballot issues if we were to make the program a statewide effort reaching every county in the state. Now I must admit, we did not have unanimous administrative support for the educational effort since we were bound to be criticized by proponents of the various proposed constitutional measures. The 1978 November Ballot Issues program marked a watershed point for public policy education at MSU when the Michigan Legislature requested permission from the university to utilize our analysis as a general mailout from state legislators to their constituents. Each election year since 1978 and if a statewide ballot question is on the November Ballot, MSU Extension produces the policy analysis bulletin and shares with the Legislature and other policy education groups in the state.

The final watershed point with policy education was the advent of “term limits”. Collaborating with the College of Social Science, MSU Extension developed a training program for new state legislators, a program that has continued every two years. College faculty led by public policy specialists are actively engaged in preparing policy briefing papers for the training sessions. The two and one-half day training program is conducted prior to the legislators assuming office in January.

Now, I recognize that all of you can cite quite different examples where your university and extension system benefited and political capital was earned from your public policy education efforts. For some institutions, farm policy, international trade, environmental policy, economic development, family and consumer science, citing of animal operations or land use conflicts represent key public policy programming efforts. I’m concerned like the rest of you with the apparent dwindling interest in the National Public Policy Education Conference. We cannot let the trend continue. Opportunities abound for active programming in public policy education and we must make a concerted

effort at training a new generation of policy educators to maintain our “community of interests.” The Farm Foundation and the National Committee cannot re-energize the public policy education effort without all of us making a commitment to engage our institution and faculty in keeping alive this outstanding opportunity for professional development and extension programming. To fail at this task will diminish civil civic engagement. Thank you for this opportunity to share my thoughts with you.