III. Motivating the Agronomist of the Future

Merle Mulvaney

In order to have qualified agronomists of the future, it is essential that students who are now entering college develop a goal and by some means become sufficiently motivated to attain this goal.

The question then arises, how are we to motivate these students so that they will develop a goal and will aspire towards excellence of performance in a particular field?

Many volumes have been written on motivation and it is still difficult to point out the specific factors that are responsible for it; however, I believe there are four primary factors that do motivate the student. They are: (1) The instructor, (2) Extra-curricular activities, (3) The institution, and (4) The student himself.

Let us discuss each of these in more detail.

1. The instructor. What are the qualities of a good instructor?

He should be qualified to teach. Unfortunately, many instructors are hired on the basis of their contribution to research with no regard to their ability as instructors. We have all seen instances where a man that was brilliant in research was completely incapable of delivering adequate classroom instruction.

The instructor should have a pleasing personality. Along with this, he should enjoy his work and be enthusiastic about it. How can you expect a student to become motivated by a subject when the instructor, who is supposedly an authority on it, isn't enthusiastic about the subject?

He should command the respect of the students by the way he handles his course and on the basis of his own ideas, beliefs, and moral standards.

The instructor should take a personal interest in each of his students. I realize that this is difficult in large classes but it is possible and necessary with small classes. Many students have been motivated by the personal advice and counsel imparted by an instructor or other member of the staff.

The instructor’s course should have a definite objective and this should always be kept in mind. The course should be well organized and abreast of the times. This means that an instructor will be constantly striving to improve his course. No sooner will he get it set up the way he desires it than he will have to make some changes.

As far as teaching methods are concerned, the instructor should develop a foundation upon which to build new knowledge. It is very difficult for a student to acquire technical knowledge if he doesn’t understand the underlying principles. However, the instructor must use some discretion in his review of the basic material. If he dwells too long upon it, it may be more detrimental than beneficial to the course.

This is where most of our college courses fail. There seems to be a tendency for the course to be parrot type instruction, where the student could regurgitate the discussion. Also, appropriate practical exercises could also be used to let the student know how he is progressing in the course.

2. Extra-curricular activities. Extra-curricular activities can be and sometimes are quite effective in motivating the student. Many times this is the first glimpse he has of a particular field. Departmental clubs are especially valuable from this standpoint. However, in order to make a club effective, the club must have competent officers and advisors who realize the value of such organizations. These clubs are in a constant striving to create new interest in the departments.

Unfortunately, many clubs operate under the assumption that all of their members are already interested in a particular field. This isn’t necessarily true. The student will join an organization just to have something to do. It is up to the club to sell this individual on the club. Departmental clubs should help their members to become aware of the unlimited opportunities that await them upon graduation from college.

3. The institution. The college or university should motivate the student by helping him choose that which is best suited for him. This guidance can be accomplished by means of guidance exams, aptitude tests, counseling bureaus.

The institution can further help the student by obtaining a favorable student-instructor ratio. We all know it is easier to stand up before a class of 15 or 20 students than to a group of 200 students.

The institution should try to foster an atmosphere of friendliness and helpfulness. In other words, the institution should have an open-door policy. Words cannot express what it means to the student to be able to step into the office of one of the members of the staff or even the dean’s office and find there a genuine interest in his welfare.

4. The student. Last but not least is the student himself.

Even when the other three factors are fulfilled, if the student has no desire for further attainment, he will not achieve his goal. Conversely, if the student is already motivated, it will be easier to get the other factors in place.