An Appraisal of Undergraduate Curricula in Agronomy

J. Ritchie Cowan

A curriculum is defined as a program of study leading to a particular degree. It is an important component of our educational system. There must be the student and the instructor, but to tie them together in an orderly fashion, there must be the curriculum or curricula. A curriculum, regardless of its structure and composition, is of little value if we do not have teachers who are inspirational, motivating, and creative. In developing the curriculum there are two essential questions to be answered. First -- what is the goal of the student? Second -- how can this goal best be achieved? We are assembled here to evaluate our experience and ideas and to project them into the future so that a better job of instruction can be done for undergraduates having agronomy as their major field of interest.

Director Fortmann has expressed a sense of frustration when trying to define agronomy. Need we worry too much? Agronomy is a full-fledged profession as evidenced by a membership of 6,300 in the American Society of Agronomy and some 635 scientific papers to be presented during the 1967 annual sessions of that society.

Albert K. Cohen raises the question, "Is there hope for undergraduate education?" (1) This is an excellent admonition and we must heed it and make certain that we preserve a strong undergraduate program in agronomy.

A curriculum must be a dynamic system. To remain static is to become worthless. In a field such as agronomy where the volume of information available is multiplying at a phenomenal rate, the instructor must have a different and better vehicle for presenting this information to his students than the vehicle which was afforded him in the past.

At the same time his students will have different goals than those which he had as a student. His students will come with greater preparation and greater breadth and depth of knowledge of many related fields and education as a whole. He must also consider the kind of role which his students will play 15 to 20 years from now, because this is the real challenge presented him when teaching university students.

1Head, Farm Crops Dept., Oregon State Univ., Corvallis 97331.