

Using the Blues as a Teaching Tool

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OFF WE GO INTO THE WILD BLUE WONDER!

Blue wonder? Yes, that's just how I felt today as I filled in the forms and sealed the envelope for another year's shot at the "blue."

And I have often wondered if you too are wondering how to get the blue, why aim for it, and what good getting it really does. Just in case you're wondering—I'm referring to the blue ribbons awarded in the AAACE Communications Contest.

For 15 years I have watched various members of our office team get the blues. Sometimes these were ribbons—telling of successful efforts at judge pleasing—at other times they were the also-ran blues. Each time I wondered what we had learned.

Reports are that some other AAACE'ers wonder how valuable the contest is and how to make it more useful. Perhaps the real wonder is that the contest has lived these many years. One answer is that enough participants enjoy and receive blue ribbon recognition to keep entries coming in year after year.

What Is Purpose of Contest?

Personally, I have long wondered the real purpose of the contest. Years ago, I am told, prizes were given for the best in each class. I have heard that editors and photographers sometimes worked weeks to win a rosette. But usually the more prosperous and aggressive states took home the blue and purple ribbons. As a result, the contest was modified to give blue, red, and white ribbons, without naming overall champions.

Some years ago I served as chairman of the contest committee. At that time I decided that the only valid reasons for the contest

were to share ideas among the various states and to learn what "competent" judges thought was good and bad about our work.

Exchanging entries is easier in some classifications than in others. For example, when Lyman Nordhoff was information specialist for the Extension Service in Washington, D.C., he gathered copies of blue-ribbon-winning publications and distributed them to all states. This method gave publications editors an idea of what the judges thought was good, even though we may not have known why.

In the North Central Region, most of us publications editors share ideas by exchanging our new publications with other editors.

On the other hand, it would be difficult to send around entries such as large exhibits, slide sets, television films, and radio tapes. Probably the only AAACE members who get a good look at all of these are those who attend the annual meetings.

Judges Most Important

As I see the educational feature of the contest—the most important "teacher" could and should be the judges. If they will spend the necessary time to tell WHY as well as what they liked or disliked, the contest can become educational. This will take more time—and the judges will need a different orientation than they apparently have been getting.

Many times I have seen entry blanks come back, on both blue ribbon winners and on also-rans, with no comments by the judges, sometimes without even a name. Even though the judge may circle 1, or 6, or 9, I don't know why he did it. The year I was contest chairman, the periodical judges did an outstanding job of giving their reasons for their judging decisions. This, to me, was an educational effort.

Just yesterday, I was looking over some old entry forms. On one entry two judges rated it 135, while the third rated it 82. I wondered if they all understood the purpose, the audience, or the reason for our publications. On another form, one judge noted "writing less than perfect," while another commented, "good writing."

Most of us like to win prizes for our efforts. It's encouraging

to learn that someone approves of our work, but without some educational aspects, the contest seems to have little purpose.

Ideas That Might Work

Everyone can't win blue ribbons, and not everyone deserves them. Still, I wonder what would happen if we:

—Explained to the judges that the main purpose of the contest was educational and that we hoped they would both judge and give reasons accordingly.

—Selected judges who have had a wide understanding of extension's and research's purposes.

—Submitted entries on the basis of a multi-media approach to a problem.

—Streamlined the classifications, even if we had to add more, to keep the entries more nearly in line. For example, have a class for research and one for extension annual reports. (The year I was chairman, at least one entry received a blue ribbon, even though it didn't belong in that class, and I thought it should have been disqualified.)

—Described the problem and audience in enough detail to give the judges a better grasp of the purpose for the entry.

—Listed some of the major limitations overcome in creating the entry.

—Put more emphasis on feedback, audience response. (Although hard to read, response would indicate how useful the entry was.)

—Selected judges from county agents, 4-H advisors, farmers, homemakers, or others who actually put such materials into use.

Had some in-person judging at the annual meeting and recorded the action on film and tape for viewing by editors not present.

If we as an organization feel the contest is significant enough to be continued, we must make a blue-ribbon effort to make it more useful. When it ceases to be wonder-full and becomes wonderful, the AAACE blues will sweep the country just like the St. Louis or Basin Street did.