

# The Short Course Experience at the NDAC

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The Short Course Reunion held in conjunction with the Harvest Bowl celebration at NDSU in the fall of 1992 reminds us of an educational experience that played a prominent role at the North Dakota Agricultural College for more than three-quarters of a century.

Short courses, which existed at most land-grant institutions in the United States, were designed to meet the needs of what we would now call “non-traditional” students. Specifically, short courses were tailored for people who did not usually have the requisite formal education for admission into a regular college program but who needed the practical education and advice an agricultural college could provide.

The first short course was offered in the NDAC’s inaugural year, and the College Bulletin was clear on who it was intended for: “There certainly is in the State of North Dakota a considerable number of farmers and young men possessing neither time, funds, nor perhaps inclination to pursue the regular course of study covered by the intended curriculum of the college. . . but who would certainly appreciate the advantages offered for improvement in the theory and practice of agriculture.”

The scheduling of the short course reflected the fact that it was designed for working farmers. It began in early January and continued into March, operating on the assumption that “during the winter season” farmers would be “comparatively unoccupied.”

Patterns set in the first short course continued to characterize later short courses. Not only did they continue to be held in the winter months, but they continued to be offered by the best of the regular instructors. In that first short course Horace Stockbridge, Edwin Ladd, Theries Hinebauch, C. B. Waldron, and H. L. Bolley delivered a total of 225 lectures on agricultural and scientific topics ranging from “Practical Horse-Shoeing” to “Fungi: Parasitic, Saprophytic, Useful, and Injurious.” It is clear that the people at the NDAC intended to provide short-course students with nothing less than the best and most comprehensive agricultural information available.

As time went on, the short course took on a more evangelical tone. In his circular outlining the course of study for the winter of 1900, President John Henry Worst argued that agriculture was as demanding a profession as any other, and that farmers needed special training just as much as “candidates in other professions.” Worst concluded by urging that “agriculture is practically the only source of wealth production in this state. Let us make our calling a noble one.”

The 1900 circular also indicates that the NDAC was striving in the short course to provide an education that was both “liberal and practical,” as the Morrill Act required of land-grant colleges. Along with the agricultural courses, the 1900 program also featured “drill in parliamentary practice, debating, essay writing, and declamation” taught



*Short Course meat class — the instructor is Al Severson, animal husbandry. Severson was on faculty from 1920 to 1943.*

by President Worst. One wonders how many of the early leaders of the American Society of Equity, the Nonpartisan League, and the Farmers Union developed their organizational and political skills in the winter short courses at the NDAC.

Another sign of the evolution of the short course was the increasing attention devoted to farm mechanics. Agriculture was undergoing a mechanical revolution at the turn of the century, and the NDAC was quick to recognize it. By 1900 the short course featured classes in mechanics and steam engineering, and classes in gas mechanics were offered as early as 1907. There were few gasoline-powered tractors in North Dakota at that time, but the NDAC had a clear sense of the shape of things to come.

By the early years of this century the short course had evolved into two separate one-year programs, a development reflecting the increasing complexity of the agricultural enterprise. "Schedule A" was livestock oriented, while "Schedule B" stressed crops. Many students returned a second year to complete the full short-course program.

The short courses reached their fullest development during the 1920s. In 1925, for example, short courses were offered in agriculture, automobile and gas tractor engineering, elevator management, and domestic science. The domestic science short course was designed for "women who can devote only a very brief period of time in training for their life work," and was comprised of 220 hours of recitation and laboratory work, including 100 hours of English and arithmetic.

In the early years of the Great Depression the short course was effectively ended, though a "Farmers' and Homemakers' Week" was created in partial compensation. The record is silent on why the short course was dropped, but we can confidently surmise that economics was the main consideration. Not only was the NDAC budget slashed to the bone, but prospective students found even nominal costs more difficult to bear.

The NDAC had always kept short-course costs down in order to make the program accessible to as many people as possible. In 1900 the matriculation fee was only two dollars, and Worst estimated total expenses for a twelve-week term at under fifty dollars, board and room included. Even in the twenties short-course students could probably get along on less than ten dollars per

week. But even minimal amounts could be high for students. One 1916 student remembered that he was able to attend that year because “we had a big crop” and “we could afford the course.” In the early thirties, when wheat brought a quarter a bushel at the elevator and yields averaged under ten bushels per acre, few could afford even to think of coming to Fargo for ten weeks.

The short course was resurrected by Dean H. L. Walster in 1937 as the “Farm Folk School,” modeled on a Danish institution by that name. The Farm Folk School had a first- and a second-year program, each with three five-week terms. The curriculum was heavily agricultural in emphasis, but it also included “courses which deal with the social, cultural, and economic relationships of rural life,” such as public speaking, theater, sociology, family relations, civics, and the history of North Dakota. Farm Folk School Principal W. J. Promersberger, who considers Walster to have been “one of the smartest people ever to walk the earth,” believes that the Dean included these courses in order to give the students “a little culture, which they probably needed.”

The NDAC got an assist from a New Deal agency, the National Youth Administration, in helping students meet expenses — estimated in 1940 at \$43.50 per five-week term. The NYA agreed to hire Folk School students to remodel the second floor of Dakota Hall — a World War I barracks just north of Ladd Hall — into a dormitory. One shift worked in the morning while the other attended class, and in the afternoon they switched. At night they slept in the hall. As compensation the NYA paid Farm School students \$30 per month for 100 hours labor.

World War II ended the Farm Folk School, but the short courses reappeared shortly thereafter, directed by Peder Nystuen. The program remained a two-year one. It was heavily oriented toward practical agriculture, but it included such courses as Communications, Reading for Enjoyment, and How to Listen.

Throughout their history, the short courses were taught almost exclusively by regular faculty, with only occasional help from part-time hirees. This contributed to teaching loads that were staggering. For example, Bill Promersberger remembers having a teaching load of 39 contact hours per week in the winter of 1953! As he noted with a good deal of understatement, “it was quite a challenge to meet all of these classes and laboratories.”

Promersberger and the other short-course faculty were willing to accept this challenge because the short-course students were special people. They made great sacrifices in time and money to attend the short course. Unlike many students, they valued education and did not take it for granted. For them, this was a rare opportunity, and they were determined to make the most of it. As a Farm Folk School student told the *Forum* in 1939, “It’s the chance of a lifetime for me. . . I couldn’t have gone to school past the eighth grade if I hadn’t had this chance.”

The more than 4000 people who completed NDAC short courses were among the brightest and most energetic people in their communities. They brought with them enthusiasm and determination and commitment. They carried away practical knowledge and broadening experiences that made them better farmers and better community leaders. They carried away associations

and friendships they would maintain through life. And they carried away a respect for the NDAC and for what it was trying to do for the people of North Dakota.

Arthur Link, a 1930 short-course graduate who went on to a career of distinguished service as a legislator, congressman, and governor, writes that “as I recall this brief time in my youth I realize more and more how much my Short-Course experience influenced my maturity and the value of that experience in my total growth.” The lives of productivity and service led by Arthur Link and thousands of other short-course graduates is eloquent testimony to the value of that experience.

Short courses were last offered at NDSU in 1969. They ended because increasing numbers of farm youth were taking the regular four-year college course, extension and adult education courses in many communities were fulfilling the historic short-course role, and the North Dakota Bankers Association, which had provided scholarships since 1956, ceased its financial support.

But the short course lives on in the memories of those to whom it provided the opportunity to learn, a graphic illustration of why NDSU was, and is, “the people’s university.”