

A Profession at Risk?

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It is a most humbling experience for me to address my fellow teacher educators, but at the same time, a real professional pleasure. Needless to say, it was extremely selfish on my part to have accepted this responsibility. Nevertheless, I am honored and very much appreciate the opportunity to share with you some of my thoughts on teacher education in agriculture.

Basically, I consider myself an optimist. I hope my remarks do not come across as being too pessimistic. However, they are, by design, pessimistically-based, but I hope, in the final analysis, optimistically-oriented.

I thought long and hard about what I might communicate to my peers which would be academic, sophisticated, well-annotated, distinguished, scholarly, and relatively well received. This mental exercise caused me much frustration and anxiety. On numerous occasions, fear and uncertainty filled my every waking moment. Then one day, not too long ago, I said to myself--to heck with it all--there is nothing academic or distinguished I could convey to my colleagues. There is only one subject which I could ever hope to address with any degree of confidence--that being, teacher education in agriculture and the threats I feel cloud its future. If you please, may I spend a few minutes to address the question, "Are we a profession at risk?"

Since my second love in life is vocational education and the teachers who devote their time, talent, and energy to the honorable calling of teaching, it will come as no surprise to any of you that, once the topic was identified, I immediately contacted the 50 presidents of state vocational agriculture teachers associations to help me re-examine some of my professional fears, prejudices, and biases. Since I am, like teachers of vocational agriculture, a teacher educator in agriculture by choice, not by chance, I respect and heed their opinions, their judgments and their perceptions. Throughout this presentation, when I refer to teachers, I will be referring to those 44 of the 50 state VATA presidents who responded to my survey. Please erase any assumptions that I am about to report research findings, because I am not. My only intent is to share with you my opinions on the topic at hand and, when appropriate, legitimize them with those of the teachers.

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At the very onset, let me make it extremely clear I have a firm conviction that the primary justification for my position as a teacher educator is to prepare and then serve those teachers in the field as they plan, deliver, and evaluate quality programs of vocational agriculture; programs designed to equip their students with those agricultural and leadership competencies essential for them to enter into agricultural occupations of their choice. Please note that I said "primary justification." Those of you who know me well realize that my every professional act or action has a deliberate relationship to assist vocational agriculture teachers deliver what "we profess" we should be delivering in the field.

The profession of Agricultural Education has a rich past; a past which has been built upon a sound philosophical foundation and defensible educational practices and principles. One only needs to study the evolution of teacher education in agriculture to ferret out how we have grown and matured as a profession. From a humble beginning designed primarily to prepare teachers of vocational agriculture, our profession has grown into a multi-faceted, multi-functional entity.

Expansion of Functions

May I dwell a moment upon this expansion of functions since it has implications for some of my later thoughts. Initially, programs of teacher education in agriculture addressed only the "teaching" function (Berkey, 1981). In the beginning, major emphasis was placed upon teaching prospective educators those pedagogical skills essential for them to function as vocational agriculture teachers.

The functions and resultant responsibilities assumed by teacher education in agriculture have expanded rapidly in the past two decades, especially since the passage of the Vocational Education Act of 1963. Teacher education programs have been expanded to assume functions such as research; inservice education; beginning teacher supervision; curriculum development, dissemination and evaluation; college teaching improvement; extension education; international education; and recently, microcomputer applications in agriculture, to name a few. This shift, over time, from primarily one major function (teaching) to a multifunctional role has created a severe demand upon already limited fiscal and human resources. In reality, this expansion of functions may be the culprit for why we may be a profession at risk. For example, as we have taken on a multitude of new functions and responsibilities, have we de-emphasized our strong foundation of teaching prospective teachers how to teach? Have we downplayed the undergraduate program and its inherent teaching tools such as problem solving, FFA, and SOE which are the envy of all of education? Based upon the reaction of the teachers, we have. When asked what additional training they wished they had received-- FFA and SOE ranked very high.

It may be time we begin to re-asses our mission and re-establish realistic program priorities. We need to examine critically whether

some functions currently assumed to be ours are within the domain of teacher education in agriculture. If they are, do we have at our disposal adequate resources to do them justice without depleting resources required for the very basic essentials of an effective teacher education program? I seriously question whether "we can be all things to all people."

Realizing there is no such thing as a perfect teacher education program, are there certain generic ingredients which should be inherent in every program anyway? May I share with you four basic tenets of what, I believe, teacher education in agriculture should be and should do. These might assist us to identify basic and vital elements for teacher education to utilize in assessing and averting possible threats to the profession.

Strong Undergraduate Programs

The hottest issues in American education today concern teachers--their quality, their preparation, their training, and their performance. Therefore, first and foremost, we must continue to build a strong foundation at the undergraduate level. Many critics believe our colleges of education, with which we are either directly or indirectly associated with by the public, are not doing a very good job in this arena. It is my opinion that all of the inservice and graduate education will be near fruitless, and by and large, ineffective unless we have established a solid foundation in the preservice education program. One only needs to work with temporarily- our industry certified teachers to appreciate this statement. These individuals, in the aggregate, do not possess a sound philosophy of a total program, nor do they usually utilize the FFA and SOE as teaching tools.

To this end, we as professional teacher educators must instill a sound philosophy of and a positive attitude towards teaching in our future teachers. This might be our most critical role. Naturally, this philosophy and attitude must be "backed" with the effective use of professional education competencies.

In 1977, Crunkilton (1977) chaired an ad hoc AATEA committee which identified topics which should be included within the methods courses utilized in teacher education in agriculture. This committee's findings, if utilized in every teacher education program, would most assuredly provide the strong undergraduate preparation foundation required. Equipping our prospective teachers with only survival skills in teaching will not suffice in the future and, in my judgment, has been tolerated for too long in the past.

It is in the best interest of our profession to utilize the best qualified, most effective, most dedicated, and motivated teacher educators at the undergraduate level, all things considered. As pointed out in the October 1984 issue of the *Kappan* (Clark, 1984), teacher education can only be as good as its undergraduate program.

Set the Example

Second, we should set the example in teacher education in agriculture which will serve as a "model" for programs in the field. Again, the response from the teachers bears out this point most explicitly. How can we expect teachers to utilize approved teaching techniques and practices; to employ problem solving teaching and learning; to implement competency-based instruction; to utilize advisory committees; to stress long range program planning; to employ external program evaluation techniques; to establish and maintain staff and program standards; etc., if we in teacher education do not have these same components incorporated into our own teacher education programs?

Relative to the use of approved teaching practices, I will never forget a statement made by Dr. Earl Anderson, Professor of Higher Education at The Ohio State University in the 1960's in which he stated: "We teach the way we were taught, rather than the way we were taught to teach." I wonder if Anderson's statement would still be appropriate today--surely not in teacher education programs in agriculture.

In reviewing the importance of the problem solving approach to teaching, Dickerson (1984) shared his concern that this approach to teaching is being rejected by numerous teachers of vocational agriculture. Are we adequately teaching teachers how to utilize this methodology, or are we leaving it to chance? Of more consequence, are we employing the problem solving approach in our methods courses? Teaching about problem solving and using problem solving in teaching students how to use this approach are two different things.

Assistance to Teachers

Third, we must, I strongly believe, provide more assistance to teachers in the field as they plan, deliver, and evaluate quality programs designed to satisfy the occupational needs of their students. Few in this room would not agree that the real change agent in any educational endeavor is the local teacher.

Again, teachers in state leadership roles stressed the need for assistance from teacher education. In the aforementioned survey, I asked, "What kinds of assistance does teacher education provide you as a vocational agriculture teacher?" This was followed with this question: "Has this assistance increased, decreased, or remained the same in the last five years?" How do you suppose they responded to these questions? Of more consequence, how would you answer these questions: Thirty-three percent of the teachers indicated they felt that assistance had decreased, and 44% felt it had remained the same.

In an attempt to glean a further indication of assistance provided, I posed this question, "How many times have you been visited/

observed by a teacher educator?" Are you interested in what they said? I believe you certainly should be! If we profess to the concept that learning is a life long process, should not learning for teacher likewise be a life long activity? Who is best qualified to provide this education? You know as well as I. Seventy percent of the teachers indicated that they had not been visited in the last year and 34% stated they had not been visited by a teacher educator in the past five years. If this is true with our recognized leaders, then the percentages are likely higher with the average teacher and this should cause us to have serious concerns, in my opinion. How can we expect our teachers to conduct on-site SOE supervision if we do not practice on-site instruction? As a group, AATEA has previously addressed the issue of the decline in supervisory staff in many states. Here I am not necessarily making reference to "program supervision"; I am referring to "in-field teacher education." As will be reported later, these same teachers ranked "field supervision" as the fifth most important function of teacher education.

Assistance to teachers is certainly an area which, if you are not now doing so, warrants your particular attention, in my judgment. Observing and working with teachers in the field is one of the highlights of my job.

Without sounding egotistical on your behalf, it is teacher education that "sets the stage" for most educational programs. It is obvious we in teacher education are the professional education leaders. However, we need to be somewhat humble in this role and definitely not snobbish or else we may scare off our teachers and supervisors. I am thoroughly convinced that if anything is right with education in this country, it is primarily the result of teacher education. Conversely, if anything is wrong, I believe we can likewise place much of the blame on teacher educators. If we are, in fact, the "sub surface" leaders of the profession, then we must provide assistance to teachers to help them eliminate, alleviate, and/or minimize their problems and concerns. For example, enrollment and effective legislation are their two most critical concerns. What are we doing at present to assist them in these areas?

The question, "How sensitive do you feel teacher educators are to your problems and concerns?" was asked of the teacher leaders. What do you suspect to be their answer? Seventeen percent indicated "not very aware and concerned," while 26% felt teacher educators were "very aware and concerned" relative to their problems and concerns. This is good, but 52% indicated that teacher educators were "only somewhat aware and concerned." My dear colleagues, teachers of vocational agriculture and secondary programs of vocational agriculture are our "bread and butter." If teachers feel that nearly 70% of the teacher educators are "not very aware and concerned," or "only somewhat aware and concerned" with their problems and concerns, we do have a serious problem. Are we a profession at risk?

The best way, in my judgment, for us to exert professional leadership is to work very closely with our vocational agriculture teachers. This assistance needs to be in the form of program improvement and adjustment activities.

Team Approach

The fourth and last point regarding what I believe teacher education should be and do, deals with a team approach. We, as the professional leaders, must champion a strong team effort among teachers, school administrators, state supervisors, and teacher educators. I have some strong professional concerns on whether vocational agriculture will remain in the comprehensive high school in the future. Drake (1982) surfaced a similar concern in 1982. At that time, he questioned the relative impact that secondary vocational agriculture programs have on the agricultural industry.

In regard to the potential shifting of vocational education from the secondary to the postsecondary level, key policymakers are talking loud and clear. It appears their thinking is that "vocational education does not make a difference to program completers, particularly at the high school level." Do we have research to point out the value of secondary vocational education programs in agriculture?

Ask yourself this question--what would happen to the agriculture industry in your state if every secondary vocational agriculture program were to close its doors tomorrow? This is an interesting question. Again, do we have research data to provide an answer? One thing I do know if this was to happen, there would be a lot fewer teacher educators attending AATEA Breakfasts in the future.

It is obvious why we as teacher educators must promote and develop a strong team approach with our constituents. Based upon our present mode of operation, we cannot survive as teacher educators in agriculture without secondary programs and teachers of vocational agriculture. For this reason and this reason alone, we might have to rethink our priorities and re-assess the merits of the multiple functions we are currently addressing, especially if we are spreading our resources too thin. Certainly due to rapid changes in agriculture, in education, and in agricultural education, we must become more sensitive to what our basic mission in teacher education should be. We must likewise continue to become more teacher-oriented, in my judgment.

Based upon what I have attempted to say thus far, it should be apparent that teacher educators in agriculture, if they are not doing so presently, must (a) offer the best possible pre-service teacher education program; (b) provide more and better assistance to teachers and administrators if necessary program changes are to result; (c) be more sensitive to teachers' needs, problems, and concerns; and (d) do a better job of communicating to teachers the rationale for the expanded functions we have undertaken in recent years. If we don't, these will become threats to our profession.

I would like to dwell for a moment on the latter point, "communicating with teachers in the field regarding our job." We have a real perception problem with some teachers regarding what we are doing in teacher education in agriculture. In an attempt to assist me

re-examine why I exist as a teacher educator, I asked the teachers referred to before to indicate how important they felt selected functions should be stressed by teacher education in agriculture. You can probably guess their answers!

They ranked the function of pre-service education first, in-service education second, instructional materials development third, and graduate education fourth. All these functions of teacher education are designed to assist teachers. However, they ranked international education last, research eighth, extension education seventh, and field supervision and program planning and evaluation fifth and sixth, respectively.

Needless to say, I was pleased with their ranking of teacher-oriented functions, but was somewhat shocked with their ranking of research and international programs. It is apparent to me that as we have expanded into new functional areas, we may be shifting resources away from their felt needs. This is all the more reason why we must keep our teachers informed of the new functions we are addressing in teacher education and why we are so doing. Further, if they "see" the results of our research efforts as a benefit to their programs and students, they will be more likely to understand. How much of our research is designed around and intended to help teachers? More importantly, how much of the results are shared with teachers in such a manner so they can understand and apply the results?

Suggestions for Consideration

Is our profession at risk? Are we on the verge of extinction? Can we maintain our rich heritage? The answer to these and other questions can only be answered individually and collectively by the profession. I wish I had the answers, but I do not. I only have a few suggestions for your consideration which might assist us minimize the risk of our extinction, and at the same time, perpetuate our rich heritage. These suggestions are not new functions. We do not need new functions. We need to revitalize our primary mission and shift the resources back to support that mission.

Suggestion 1. Supplementing the Background of Undergraduate Agricultural Education Majors

The background and experience of prospective teachers of vocational agriculture has changed drastically in the past two decades. A growing percentage of undergraduate students majoring in agricultural education have non-agricultural backgrounds. Fewer of our majors have, likewise, had the opportunity to participate in local youth leadership activities. Furthermore, their practical experiences regarding occupations in agriculture are extremely limited.

As a result, we in the profession cannot leave to chance the attainment of practical occupational and leadership experience development for prospective teachers. New instructional strategies must be designed and implemented. These new learning activities will need to center on such schemes as technical and practical agriculture practicum; industry internships; occupational internships, and leadership development internships, to name just a few. Now and in the future, more of these activities will need to be integrated directly into the students' undergraduate preparation program. This will require more fiscal and human resources. It means, in many cases, a shifting of resources to the pre-service function from other current activities if we are to provide a solid pre-service foundation. It is obvious "one cannot come from where one has not been." Teachers of vocational agriculture cannot plan and direct quality occupational experience programs for their students if they have not experienced such a program themselves. This challenge must be met. We must implement new educational strategies in teacher education in agriculture if this is to be accomplished. In the final analysis, the occupational expertise of the teacher will determine the success of the local program.

Suggestion 2. Preparing Future Teacher Educators in Agriculture

Those teacher education programs which are responsible for doctoral programs in agricultural education have an awesome responsibility to our profession. We have put our trust in you to prepare the future teacher education leaders for the profession. Most doctoral candidates in agricultural education will become, in all probability, future "teachers of teachers." Therefore, they must possess a sound philosophy of teacher education in agriculture, its role, its mission, and its priority of functions. If you please, they must understand and appreciate the basic functions of teacher education in agriculture. To this end, they need to study and analyze past, present, and future approaches to ferret out the best possible program design. How many doctoral candidates in agricultural education have incorporated a significant portion of their programs of study on teacher education in agriculture? Of more consequence, how many have taken one course in teacher education in agriculture? I am fearful that, in all too many cases, this expertise is "caught and not taught." How can we expect them to perform effectively as teacher educators if they have had little or no preparation in this arena. I beg of you responsible for preparing future "teachers of teachers" to give this immediate and serious consideration.

Suggestion 3. Establishing a New Mentality for Our Research Function

"You might not like what I am going to say, but truth demands I say it anyway." I fully realize the importance of scholarly work for a profession to grow and prosper. Likewise, I appreciate the role, importance, and value of well-conceived, well-designed, well-

conducted, and well-reported research. A profession to be a true profession must "write about itself?" It must possess a body of specialized knowledge. However, in my judgment, this body of knowledge must have purpose and utility germane to our mission--to prepare and assist personnel in the profession.

McCracken (1983) aptly put it, "We need to apply ourselves to the problems which confront us, rather than play the harlot because other areas have more money to spend." (p. 7) Vaughn (1983) further substantiates McCracken's point of view when he said, "Much of the research that we have done in the past in agricultural education has been base and unworthy and has only been done because research dollars have been available." (p.4)

Vaughn (1983) further points out that:

Some of the researchers we have in the field of agricultural education are brilliant at what they do and that their techniques and methodology are excellent, but the research they conduct is not necessarily meaningful or useful to the most important aspect of agricultural education--the local vocational agriculture program. (p. 7)

He further states, "The most relevant research in agricultural education will be that which is developed, conducted, and reported with the assistance of teachers from local programs." (p. 8) If this were to happen, I wonder if the low ranking teachers are presently assigning to the research function would change!

I again suggest that let's quit researching for the sake of researching and begin researching to help solve those salient problems which may be threatening our profession into extinction. As Brown (1980) so succinctly pointed out: "Too much of our creative time has been spent on ancillary areas but have done little to advance the work of our profession." (p. 2) I seriously question whether researchers have been doing what is relevant for agricultural education. We must do research for teachers and programs, not about teachers and programs.

Suggestion 4. Expending the Opportunities for Publishing to Minimize the "Catch 22" Syndrome

The "Catch 22" syndrome I make reference to connotes the conflicting roles higher education has placed upon young, non-tenured teacher educators in agriculture. On one hand, they are employed to teach and serve their profession and on the other hand, higher education impresses upon them vividly the necessity to publish in order to survive in the system. Is not it a shame that higher education has a tendency to "eat its young." If we are to perpetuate the profession with bright, innovative, creative, dedicated "new stars," we must minimize the "Catch 22" syndrome for these individuals.

The point I am attempting to make to minimize this syndrome is that research is not the only publishable scholarly writing for a profession to be "academically respectful." Does not well-thought out scholarship on effective ideas, principles, techniques, procedures, etc., designed to help teachers and programs deserve as much consideration and attention? Who controls what a profession considers to be scholarly endeavors? What constitutes scholarly publications in our own journals? Isn't the peer review process also appropriate for these other scholarly works? I think it is time this profession exerts leadership and gives credence to these kinds of scholarly work.

The suggestions I am proposing is that we expand the options and opportunities for your young teacher educators in agriculture to publish. It is my understanding there is a backlog of refereed articles pending publication in the *Journal of the AATEA*. If this is the case, let's make the *Journal* a monthly journal. If this is not plausible, let's initiate a new journal which will champion scholarly writing in such areas as policy formation; effective teaching; innovative educational delivery systems, etc., employing the peer review process and refereed work. I am fearful if we do not expand the options for our "new stars" to publish, we will be faced with a severe exodus of professional manpower.

Suggestion 5. Establishing a National Accreditation Agency for Agricultural Education

The prime component of any successful venture is competent personnel. Agricultural education is no exception. If you believe, as I, that we are obligated to prepare the most competent agricultural educators possible, I must pose this final suggestion. Accreditation of a program does not and will not guarantee quality in and of itself. Yet, the perception of quality is evident. The contribution that accreditation can make to the attainment of competent agricultural educators is not automatic. However, the potential is great if the role and purpose of program accreditation are properly perceived and utilized.

One of the characteristics of a "true" profession is that it develops and enforces standards fundamental to the continuous improvement of the profession. Such standards for teacher education in agriculture currently exist. Reference is made to those standards validated by Iowa State University (Standards, 1977).

Utilizing the list of standards specific to teacher education, Oren (1977) chaired an AATEA ad hoc committee commissioned to determine the relative degree of acceptance of these standards by teacher educators in agriculture and to make recommendations to the profession. As a result of the committee's work, this recommendation was made: "The standards for teacher education in agriculture should serve as a benchmark to guide program planning and evaluation." (p. 50)

Currently, there is an ad hoc AATEA committee chaired by Jasper Lee, charged with the responsibility to develop the philosophy and objectives, proposed governance mechanism, and procedures for the accreditation process to become a reality. The essential and necessary ingredients--standards, interest, need--are in place to move forward with this significant activity. May I suggest and request that the profession wholeheartedly supports the establishment of a national accreditation agency for teacher education in agriculture as soon as possible.

Summary

Is our profession at risk? I believe not if we act now to eliminate those threats clouding our future. As Dickerson (1984) stated, "We have always had problems and we will also have them in the future." (p. 3) Let's not look at them as problems, but as challenges. It seems as though I have been on the defensive for the profession all of my professional life. It is time we get on the offensive. Let's act and quit reacting.

Also, remember, we must not try to become what we cannot and should not. As a profession, we must agree upon and then accept those which are our real obligations and responsibilities. Without a sound mission statement of purpose, we could degenerate into an extinct profession. Whether we are or will become a profession at risk will depend upon the talent and energy of each and every one of us.

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