

MY FACEBOOK FRIENDS

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Today, one of the most talked about phenomena is MySpace® (2007) (<http://www.myspace.com>). Initially launched in 2003, you would be hard-pressed to find an American teenager who does not know about this Web site, regardless of whether or not he or she uses it. Over 50 million MySpace® accounts have been created and the majority of users are what would be labeled youth, ages 14-24. MySpace® has more page views per day than any site on the World Wide Web except Yahoo®. A similar site for college students is Facebook® (2007) (<http://www.facebook.com>) with over seven million users. So what are these Web sites and why are they so popular?

MySpace® and Facebook® are social networking sites for sharing information through *profiles* that express your identity to friends, classmates, family, or coworkers. You personalize your *profile* to express individual interests and tastes, values, favorite music and movies, or other hobbies or affiliations; a personal photograph and photo albums along with your contact information (e.g., e-mail, phone number, and address) are usually included. Registering on these Web sites using a school or work e-mail address enables other classmates or coworkers to view your profile and personal information as well as browse your photos, affiliated groups, and friends list. Friends post messages on a message board called, *The Wall*.

Once an account is established, most of your time is spent modifying your profile, uploading photos, sending messages, and viewing and commenting on your friends' profiles. The home page account tells the user if new messages, friend requests, and group and event invitations have been received since the prior log-in. Checking messages and getting comments is what

brings people back to MySpace® or Facebook® every day.

The *friend network* allows users to traverse the network through the personal profiles. An individual's top eight friends are displayed on the front page of the profile while all others appear on separate pages. People can comment on each other's profiles or photographs precisely because these elements are displayed publicly on the Web.

The social network is expanded through links of users in *groups*. *Groups* share common interests such as a favorite band, music, or sports, or their members may attend the same school. It is common to see over 100 friends, and sometimes as many as 500 friends, connected through an individual's profile or individuals with memberships in 50 or more groups. Some actual Facebook® *group* name examples include "Alpha Zeta," "We're designers, not decorators," "against socks with sandals," "I attended a school with one class in welding," "I love to cuddle," and "I play guitar and dance in my underwear."

The terms of usage for participation prohibit objectionable subject matter but it is not uncommon to find profanity, crude jokes, explicit party pictures, potentially offensive commentary, and provocative political and religious statements. Public expression or commentary nevertheless is allowed. Quotes and poems are common. Here is an example from an Alpha Gamma Rho chapter (<http://arkansas.facebook.com>):

Here's to our brothers
Here's to our booze
Here's to skipping class
Here's to hitting the snooze
Here's to specials at the local bars
Here's to us, we're AGRs

When viewing one person in a group, you will see other groups to which he or she belongs. Related groups to which some of the AGR members belong include: “No Farmers-No Food,” “I wear boots on campus,” “Small Town USA,” “I Love Chevy Trucks,” and “Yeah, I did Ag stuff in high school.” There are thousands of both serious and fun groups in Facebook[®].

I began to wonder: To what type of related groups or friends might AAAE members belong? Who would be our friends? What common interests might we share? So I searched through Facebook[®] and found this sample of *groups* to which an AAAE member may now belong or could be accused of belonging:

- *I hit the snooze button 11 times before I wake up*
- *I wear flip-flops all year long*
- *I love John Deere green*
- *Procrastinators unite...tomorrow*
- *I wear cowboy boots on campus*
- *I love Flonase*
- *All my rowdy friends*
- *I don't know how to put this, but I'm a big deal*

Let me explain why I selected these groups as relevant to AAAE.

Group 1: *I hit the snooze button 11 times before I wake up.*

This group would be best described as those who suffer a general lack of alertness to the changing environment including conditions such as declining enrollments, shifting student demographics, continued reduction of the critical mass in the profession, changes in socio-political trends in all levels of the educational system, and declines in agricultural education programs at other universities.

Declining enrollments or changing environments in colleges of agriculture continue each year nationwide. Colleges face the prospect of abolishing or combining departments and/or program areas and in some cases, merging with other college units on campus. We can look around this room and see or remember examples of departments that are now combined, merged, reduced, or eliminated. Some of

these changes began 15-20 years ago. My alma mater, the University of Maryland, eliminated its undergraduate agricultural education program in 1985. Have you noticed this? Members of this group continue to sleep and hit the snooze button.

Group 2: *I wear flip flops all year long.*

This group is very comfortable in their routine mode of operation. They maintain a single dimension to teaching that is focused on serving the traditional audience and disciplines, and they remain convinced that licensure programs of study should be the same as when they were teachers and that high school students are just like they were 30 years ago. They continue to work in their flip-flops, feeling satisfied in thinking that this same way of doing things will work for the future.

Group 3. *I love John Deere green.*

This group of friends is focused on rural, agricultural production and its traditional audiences and assumes rural agriculture and farm communities will continue to be as predictable as the green on a John Deere product. But those engaged in farm production have reached an all time low, approximately 1.6 percent of the U.S. population. We are witnessing a loss of local food-production systems in America and our nation has developed an over-reliance on the global food supply. Local communities are disappearing with a concurrent loss of connection and values. Many smaller towns and cities are experiencing an out-migration of youth and skilled workers, while there may be an in-migration of older adults. There is a clash of city, suburban, and rural values when and where governmental policy favors large over small, global over local, consolidated over independent. Are we preparing students to face these issues and to work in an increasingly global society? Or, is your program focused on high school-level programs where the perceived end objective is vocational and thus not valued by school administrators who often favor such governmental policies?

Agricultural education divisions of state departments of education are also being eliminated. The few personnel who are left behind have their responsibilities so severely

restricted that they have neither the time nor the clout or resources to help transform agricultural education programs in their states in response to these challenges. Additionally, the changes occurring in federal dollar allocations have been transferred to a new locus of control with new initiatives. And, in some states, a metamorphosis in teacher licensure is underway. While the need is great for teachers, many wonder why seemingly endless hours of educational theory, testing, or methods are needed for teaching?

Budget cuts are common at every university. When a university department or program has a narrow focus with small or declining numbers of students enrolled and is also linked with a system yielding few graduates, then that program is extraordinarily vulnerable.

Society is placing an increasing value on its own self-serving interests in issues related to the environment, animal welfare, medical care, and related areas and less on agricultural research and higher education. The population is changing rapidly and demanding more to meet society's special interests. Many are thinking green, but this green is a political movement at odds with consumer demand for agriculture.

Group 4. *Procrastinators Unite...Tomorrow.*

The group pledge is "I will never rush into a job without a lifetime of consideration." This group of AAEE friends, mostly at the university level, is slow to change, refuses to admit that conditions warrant a change, and frequently complains when faced with new or different expectations. The result is that the catalog of course offerings and the curricula are stagnant; there are no interdisciplinary offerings, little or no outside funding accrues to the programs, and many faculty members operate as if the productivity standards at the university will always be measured in the same historic ways.

Some faculty members are passive about student differences and fail to comprehend that societal changes have created a need for change. A few agricultural education departments are stuck in the paradigm that budgeted dollars are an entitlement, so there is little effort for innovation. They continue

to hire faculty with the same skills set and demographic characteristics while female enrollments in undergraduate programs have surpassed those of males and overall student populations are now older in age and from diverse cultural backgrounds (Food and Agricultural Education Information System [FAEIS], 2006).

Diversity is a complex issue that touches every aspect of our lives. Many think it means race alone, or perhaps race and gender. But diversity issues actually challenge educators to reexamine our most fundamental assumptions about access to knowledge, cultural identity, inclusive communities, and democratic principles. These were fundamental values of our society when the land-grant system was created, yet universities are being challenged to renew the covenant in higher education (National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges [NASULGC], 2001). We have a rich heritage and an important role for the future. I encourage you to read the *Engaged University* reports of the Kellogg Commission if you have not done so, and gauge yourself by the seven-point test of an engaged university.

What vision do we have for future careers of graduates? To what student populations will agricultural education programs appeal? Think about the newer issues of food safety/bioterrorism, environmental quality, animal welfare, or the significant changes in biotechnology. Maybe we should be preparing environmental educators and natural-resource or community-information educators who are skilled in teamwork and mediation. What skills will be needed for our graduates? The predictions are that 40 percent or more of future jobs will be technology jobs, primarily in the area of computer information systems. How are we preparing students to work with computer systems? It is projected that there will be more change in jobs in the next 50 years than in the past 300 years. (King & Boehlje, 2000) So, what have you changed in your curricula?

Colleges are now being asked to write impact statements on academic programs. This is the "so what?" question. Some themes include: science for the future,

applying knowledge, leadership in a global community, alumni and student contributions to society, interfacing with K-12, and integrated approaches and programs. Have you had an impact? Or do you procrastinate and delay such consideration for another day?

Group 5. *I wear boots on campus.*

This group is confident of their rich history and programmatic successes, and members hold their heads high with self-confidence. They have survived reorganization, downsizing, and changes in their programs over the years, and feel they can continue to follow these footsteps for many more years. Yet, they have a somewhat distorted perception of how this image is viewed by many faculty and potential students.

While there are favorable or improving perceptions of agriculture or agricultural education, many studies have also found limitations to agricultural education (Dyer & Breja, 2003; Dyer & Osborne, 1995; Kalme & Dyer, 2000; Osborne & Dyer, 1995, 1998, 2000). Some of the study findings include the perceived narrow focus as being vocational or job training, agricultural education students as less capable academically, programs are of average quality, counselors and school administrators who did not understand the programs or the role of agriculture, reluctance to recommend agriculture as a career, the negative image of agriculture or agriculture programs. Other studies (Wardlow, Graham, & Scott, 1995) have found that high school-age youth think agricultural careers as hard work, long hours, and dirty jobs with little prestige. In other studies, urban students and minority students were found to have a general lack of interest, a lack of knowledge of career opportunities or felt that there were limited job opportunities in agriculture (Esters & Bowen, 2005; Jones and Larke, 2001; Wiley, Bowen, Bowen, & Heinsohn, 1997). The traditional recruitment audience for collegiate agricultural education programs is FFA and 4-H members whose program enrollments are at an all-time high, yet proportionally, colleges of agriculture have not had the same increase.

We must develop a strategy for image control. We need an ad campaign: Got Milk? We must promote the careers of professionals in the field and we must recruit and serve the under-represented in our student populations. As long as we are overly confident in our narrow focus, and feel comfortable in our boots, we will continue to have limited students in the program. Marketing is an expensive venture. We must invest in and share the cost of marketing the program or we will bury the boots with the program.

Group 6: *I Love Flonase.*

This group is allergic to new ideas of instruction. They are fixed on the notion of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." Faculty members as a group are inflexible, having their own way of doing things. Are you still offering labs 1, 2, 3? Do you still have the same 8:30 a.m. MWF class after 10 years? Do you expect students to come to you for the information?

Land-grant universities have been challenged to transform the historic mission of teaching, research, and service with changes that appropriately characterize our society (NASULGC, 2001). Public universities are in a very rapidly changing marketplace with changes in the traditional assumptions about higher education. No longer can we operate under the context that if we build it, they will come. Changes in technology, demographics, competition, and legislative expectations are all influencing or altering the ways we operate.

Glenn Shinn (1994) presented in a previous distinguished lecture that we must begin with an environmental scan: record the temperature, wind, and changing field conditions. I contend that these conditions have shifted within academia from one of a provider of information to a user of information. We must begin to focus on access and the customer. Technology has transformed methods of access to that which was not realistic in the past. A large convergence is happening where all of the separate media of books, movies, television, letters, telephones, and the like can become digitized via a global network. This process is known as digital convergence (Tait & Mills, 1999) and when digital convergence

happens, there will be an array of winners and losers. The winners, called content packagers, will be those who will provide the highest quality content at a reasonable price. Customers will not care “who” provides the content but only that they have access to it, that they can use it effectively, and that it is provided when and where they want, need, or must have it (King & Boehlje, 2000).

It is predicted that by 2020, there will be 20 Land-Grant universities left that disseminate content based upon the speed of response to customer needs rather than on size and reputation (King & Boehlje, 2000). There is some attention and effort being given to this concept by the private-sector, so we need to wean ourselves off the Flonase, clear the head, and help create some sustainable interdisciplinary inter-institutional partnerships to provide the content and the access or we will be left behind.

Group 7: All My Rowdy Friends.

This is a group of socially networked friends who spend too much time talking among themselves and listening to their own solutions to problems.

We have the capacity to work beyond the roles traditionally associated with teacher education programs at the college level. As social scientists, we can be contributing partners in research in areas of teaching pedagogy, consumer behaviors, adoption of technology, and other teaching methodologies. We can be leaders in the college teaching centers, on interdisciplinary projects, and for other projects. But, new faculty members often are chided with “that’s been done before” and thus new ways of teaching, new curricular ideas or other innovations are pushed aside. Younger faculty begin to model the old ways instead of creating new ways, and in a short time the younger faculty are just like the older faculty. The challenge is to join many other networks to expand your horizon of friends and groups so that you remain challenged and stay refreshed.

*Group 8: I don’t know how to put this,
but I’m a big deal.*

These members feel very important with

their leather-bound books and journals. You know you’re a big deal and so does everybody else. These group members are focused on self to the extent that they have become self-serving to personal interests and are not team players. The result is small areas of inquiry or small projects, instead of a well-defined program of study and research among faculty in the department. Umbrella projects (with scholarly pieces distributed to different faculty members) or larger projects (where all can have a part, with the more experienced helping to train those with less ability) are lacking.

Instead of the independence of faculty, we need research threads where there is a focused agenda that will impact the target audience or issue. We cannot opt out of this responsibility just by counting publications; rather, we must exhibit scholarship through teaching and service as well.

An examination of our research presentations and publications shows a small core of individuals who have research-thread areas, but mostly it is a shotgun approach to whatever graduate students are interested in pursuing. As a faculty group, we need a team atmosphere where scholarship is shared, not research territoriality with everyone operating in a vacuum. Some mentoring is needed for younger faculty because just a few cannot carry all this responsibility. Improving one will improve all. The bar must be raised for all, but all must raise the bar.

Whether or not you fit into one of these Facebook[®] friends or groups, I think we face a shared challenge to create new groups for the future. Here are some new Facebook[®] groups that we need to consider joining.

1. *Be like KFC[®]*. Some years ago KFC[®] was known as Kentucky Fried Chicken but the environmental climate changed, so KFC[®] changed its product and the consumer focus. It created a new brand identity because it is what people wanted or needed. KFC[®] is less fried and more grilled, but it’s still chicken. Brand identity is important so we must reconsider our brand. Who are the customers? What do they need or want? More importantly, what core values will endure for these customers? Agricultural education has built a public trust over time

but if we do not continue to deliver a product that meets customer expectations in a changing society, we can lose public loyalty. Much consideration should be given to this question.

2. *I want to drive the truck.* Last year at this conference, Gary Moore (2006) asked the question: "Who is driving the pick-up truck?" Who will drive this new convergence? Will it be the technology leaders, content developers, or knowledge managers? If we do not take the leadership, private vendors will do so, and this requires rethinking the academic model. We must all be partners in this process because if we stand alone, we will not succeed. Regional collaborations, clusters of expertise, or similar models can create innovative curricula, launch research projects, and market the programs. We no longer have to be confined to our local boundaries.

The adult population is looking to universities for more than a four-year education of 18-22 year olds. New graduates are now expecting much more than ongoing access to research, information, education, and training during their working careers (King and Boehlje, 2000). But, the pick-up truck is too small; we need a transporter because the world is our market.

3. *I accept the leadership.* This is a group that takes the lead for knowledge creation and knowledge access. Unless we want to continue to be downsized, merged, or eliminated, we must create access to and for different populations. This group will need to strive particularly to remember and apply the test of engagement: Stay relevant to the changing needs of both communities of place and of interest.

This means taking risks, and thus risk-taking leadership is needed. We must add diversity to the portfolio not because it is the trend, but because it is the right thing to do. You must increase your understanding of why diversity is good and right and work to look beyond traditional groups for solutions. We need new partners. We must also think outside the box for interdisciplinary majors. Perhaps we should consider service

courses that could serve a larger population in terms of conveying the importance of agricultural education to the world, including its relevancy to policy issues, global environment, service learning, or other industry groups.

The future design and management of agricultural education programs cannot be answered by a dated textbook approach. It can no longer be business as usual. Considerable thought needs to occur as to what is appropriate for our mission and role for the future. Our history is rich, but I feel that just as Facebook[®] has riveted the world with its instant connectivity, we must take some very drastic steps to CHANGE our paradigm so that we remain relevant in a complex academic environment. Which group are you willing to join?

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