

# **A View from the Point Rows: Reflections on a Faculty Career**

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Many thanks to Tracy Rutherford for extending this invitation! I can say with absolutely no sense of false modesty that this is an honor I never expected to come my way. I am deeply humbled to have this opportunity to share a few thoughts with friends and colleagues whom I value and respect so much.

However, before I do this, I'd like to introduce my wife, Leslie, and my oldest son, Reid. Leslie made the trip down from Fayetteville so we could squeeze in a visit with Reid, who is a Ph.D. candidate in the Technical Communications program here at Texas Tech. (Reid has been working with us all weekend and we are fairly sure we've got the whole Texas Tech "Guns Up" thing just about mastered!) It is special to have Leslie and Reid here this afternoon; the only thing that could possibly make it better would be to have our youngest son, Russell, and our daughter-in-law, Kristen, here too. I am truly blessed with a wonderful family!

In preparation for today, like every other speaker, I read the previous lectures which are all published in the *Journal of Agricultural Education*. It didn't take long for me to come to the same conclusion as Michael Newman did in 2017 – it's all been said (much better than I can say it) and it's all been done (much better than I can do it). However, something else Michael wrote helped quite a bit. To quote, "My advice to all of you who have the honor of doing this in the future: Ignore all the old ones and just talk about what you want" (p.1). Good advice, Michael – that's exactly what I plan to do today.

So, my topic this afternoon is, "A View from the Point Rows: Reflections on a Faculty Career." Many of you will already know what point rows are; others will not. In row crop farming, point rows are the short rows in irregular or trapezoidal shaped fields (Hunt, 2016). In planting, cultivating, and harvesting these fields, common practice is to work the long rows first and save the point rows for last. Thus, "being in the point rows" implies that most of your work is done and there's only a little left to do.

After 36 years as a college professor, I am in the point rows of my career – not quite done but getting closer. My long rows are all cultivated, and only the point rows remain!

I have spent all 36 of these years as a faculty member, engaged in the customary faculty activities of teaching, research, and service. This has been my professional life and my vocation, and I have never wanted to do anything else!

In the immortal words of the great philosopher Ferris Bueller (Hughes, 1986), "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it" (00:04:37). So, this afternoon, with your indulgence, I plan to take a little time, look around, and share some reflections on teaching, research, and service.

## **Teaching**

Let me begin with teaching. As a first-generation college student, I *know* that attending and graduating from college is nothing short of a springboard that allows students from humble backgrounds to access opportunity and excel in their professional and personal lives.

According to Chan (2016), college graduates have advanced knowledge and skills; earn higher salaries; have better benefits and working conditions and lower unemployment rates; are less likely to experience poverty; have greater personal and professional mobility; have greater ability to adapt to new technologies; and are even more likely to raise high IQ children. While I know that correlation is not causation, I am confident that a significant portion of the variance in these outcomes can be *directly* attributed to higher education. I know this has been true in my life! In our current climate, this is a message we cannot share too widely or too often.

My philosophy of teaching is pretty simple. Keep content current and relevant; be organized, clear, and enthusiastic; encourage and enable students to meet high standards; encourage effort and reward accomplishment; be fair; be flexible when the situation warrants; be approachable; and, above all, treat students with courtesy and respect. This philosophy is consistent with Lowman's (1990) two-dimensional model of excellence in college teaching which prioritizes intellectual excitement and interpersonal rapport.

I owe a debt of gratitude to four of my professors who embodied these characteristics in their teaching. At Western Kentucky University, Bob Schneider; at the University of Missouri, Bob Birkenholz, Bill Hires, and Jim Frisby. These individuals not only taught content, but, by example, they taught what it means to be a committed teacher and educator.

As a master's student, I benefitted immensely from the mentoring of Bob Schneider who "saw more in me than I could see in myself." His confidence and encouragement are largely responsible for where I am today. I was Dr. Schneider's teaching assistant, and one day after lab, he made an off-hand comment something along the lines of, "Don, you know a lot of college faculty are going to be retiring over the next few years. Have you ever thought about earning a Ph.D. and being a college professor?"

Quite honestly, to this point, the thought had not entered my mind. However, this offhand question planted the seed that altered the course of my life. Because of this experience, I am constantly aware of how even a casual remark or interaction can have a profound effect on a student.

Let me illustrate this point by sharing, with permission, an email conversation I had a few years ago. The first email (Anonymous, personal communication, February 1, 2021) read, "Dr. Johnson, I know this is going to be an odd question. In the Fall of 1993, did you happen to have an office on the third floor of the old Ag building?"

I briefly responded that yes, I had been officed there in fall 1993. I received this email (Anonymous, personal communication, February 1, 2021) in reply, "Well, you're going to either find this rather amusing or mildly weird . . . for the past 28 years, EVERY time I've heard the song "I'm not Lisa," I think of you!"

[A quick pause here: How many of you know this song? The song was released in 1975, hit Number 1 on the country chart, and Number 4 on the pop chart. Jesse Colter was the artist, and the relevant lyrics go, "I'm not Lisa – My name is Julie – Lisa left you years ago" (lines 1-3). Now, back to the email.]

My first semester at the U of A was fall of '93. I was 18 and the experience was awful for a lot of reasons. I was coming from a series of childhood traumas and had been living on my own for nearly two years. Anyway . . . as a student worker for Dr. Graham, you and I would pass in the hallway. That's when you would cheerfully start to sing, "I'm not Lisa," because you said I struck you as a "Lisa." Of course, you would often continue that the song didn't fit because "your name isn't Julie either." Regardless, even on the worst days, it always made me laugh.

I only lasted the one semester. Finances took their toll. I didn't have family support, and my grades weren't good enough to get a scholarship. Even working overnight at Tyson and part time for Dr.

Graham wasn't enough to cover my expenses. For years though, when the song came up, I would tell my daughter about the professor I met my first semester who would sing the song.

Last semester my daughter was talking about her classes. She mentioned you by name. I said something to the effect of, "THAT'S I'm not Lisa!" I decided to wait until the semester was over before confirming my suspicion. All of this to say, it's been 28 years and it's time I said, "THANK YOU." Thank you for being a positive memory from a difficult time in my life. (Anonymous, personal communication, February 1, 2021)

Friends, I am constantly humbled by how little it takes to make a difference in our students' lives. This is both a tremendous blessing *and* a tremendous responsibility. I encourage you to carry this awareness with you into every classroom, every office visit, every advising appointment, every hallway conversation, and every other student encounter throughout your career. Your words and actions have the potential to influence students' lives in profound ways. Whenever possible, lean into kindness and encouragement.

When I have the chance to talk to new faculty at my institution, I always make it a point to talk about Calhoun County, Arkansas. Calhoun County is located in south-central Arkansas approximately 300 miles from Fayetteville. According to the 2020 Census (US Census Bureau, n.d), Calhoun County has a population of 4,739; the county seat is Hampton, with a population of 1,163. Hampton High School serves the entire county and has 223 students in Grades 7 – 12 (Arkansas Department of Education, 2025). By contrast, the University of Arkansas has a current enrollment of 33,600, with 7,000 students projected for the fall 2025 freshman class (University of Arkansas, n.d.)

According to institutional data (University of Arkansas, n.d.), three students from Calhoun County are currently enrolled at the University of Arkansas. If you are one of these three students, the University is *seven* times larger than your entire county and the freshman class is *31* times larger than your entire high school. Although Calhoun County is an extreme example, 54 of Arkansas' 75 counties have populations less than the University's total enrollment (Arkansas Economic Development Institute, 2025).

So why do I make it a point to share this with new faculty? Imagine being one of those three Calhoun County students, 300 miles from home, in a strange new place, lost in a sea of strangers. Perhaps a bit unsure of whether or not you belong. Now imagine yourself as their professor. How much would a friendly smile and a quick "Good morning," mean to them on the first day of class? How much would it mean if you called them by name and told them how happy you were to have them in class? How much would it mean if you expressed confidence that they could succeed in your course? How much would it mean if you were simply kind, encouraging, and helpful? What would be the impact?

I encourage each of you to go back to your state and find your Calhoun County and *look for* and *look out for* these students and others like them. Your efforts will mean more to these students than you will ever know!

Because I know many of you and I know the kind of teachers you are, I know that you do these things every day. While it may be the teaching awards and professional recognitions that get highlighted on the annual reviews, promotion and tenure dossiers, and news articles, here are the things that really matter:

All those times you worked and planned and prepared so that you could explain complex subjects to your students in clear, concise, and meaningful ways – *all because you care deeply about student learning.*

That time you worked to craft the perfect, personalized letter of recommendation that helped a student get that much-needed scholarship, internship, or job – *all because you care about your students and you are invested in their futures.*

That time the non-traditional student told you, “I’m not sure I belong here – by the time I graduate in three years I’ll be 38.” And you said to her, “Yes, you DO belong here – and by the way, how old will you be in three years if you don’t graduate? See you next week!” *All because you refuse to acquiesce in the diminishment of any student’s dream of what she might do or become.*

That time you saw a student’s potential and did not accept mediocrity but insisted on excellence – *all because you saw more in that student than he saw in himself.*

That time you were knee deep in term papers and final exams, but you took the time to listen to a student’s problems – *not because you could solve them, but simply because she needed someone to listen.*

That time you handed back an exam to a struggling student and, instead of adding insult to injury, you quietly encouraged, “John, you’ve still got some work to do, but you’re moving in the right direction – let’s visit for a few minutes after class.” *All because you realize that sometimes encouraging effort is more productive than criticizing performance.*

I could go on, but I trust that you got the point a long time ago. These are the small but important things that make such a difference in our students’ lives.

I also firmly believe that above and beyond subject matter there is a moral and ethical dimension to all great teaching. I’ll illustrate this with a story about my friend and colleague, Dr. Casandra Cox. As many of you know, Dr. Cox is a truly outstanding teacher. This is true for many reasons. But in over 20 years of watching her interact with students, I am convinced that the secret of her success is that while she has *high expectations for her students*, she has *even higher expectations for herself*. Students work hard for her because they see how hard she works for them.

Now for the story. For years Dr. Cox taught a computer applications course for our college. The capstone course requirement was for each student to develop a complex problem-solving spreadsheet and produce a PowerPoint presentation describing the development and use of the spreadsheet. One young man turned in his project and Dr. Cox quickly determined that he had recycled a previous student’s project as his own. He had cheated. She met with the student, confirmed that he had plagiarized his work, and assigned a zero grade for the project. Consequently, the student failed the course.

The next semester, this same student enrolled in Dr. Cox’s section of the course, despite the availability of sections taught by other instructors. He completed the semester, developed a completely original project, and passed the course. At the end of the semester, Dr. Cox asked the young man why he had enrolled in her section after his experience the previous semester. The young man looked her in the eye and said, “I know I let you down when I cheated last semester. I enrolled in your section this semester because I wanted to make it up to you.”

Friends, great teachers not only teach content, but by their example, they also teach character! Banner and Cannon (1997) put this well in their excellent book, *The Elements of Teaching*, when they wrote:

For if teachers are trustees of their students’ welfare, they must consider not just why they are teaching and how, but also with what. That is to say, they must know what their acts exemplify,

what qualities of life and character they themselves embody, as they try to convey knowledge to others. (p.4)

As we teach and interact with our students, let us be like Dr. Cox and continually strive to embody the best qualities of life and character for our students.

Finally, the one thing I know and believe with every fiber of my being is that good teaching is important! In the 1958 preface to his book, *The Thread that Runs So True*, Kentucky author and educator Jesse Stewart wrote, "I am firm in my belief that a teacher lives on and on through his [*sic*] students. . . . tell me, how can good teaching ever die? Good teaching is forever, and the teacher is immortal!" (p. 7). Let me read that again: "I am firm in my belief that a teacher lives on and on through his [*sic*] students. . . . tell me, how can good teaching ever die? Good teaching is forever, and the teacher is immortal!"

Indeed, what was true in 1958 is true today and will be true long after the youngest graduate student in this room is old and gray and stands before this group to deliver some future Distinguished Lecture! *How can good teaching ever die? Good teaching is forever!*

## Research

Let us now briefly turn to research. Over my years in the profession, I have seen many positive changes in both the process and the products of our research conferences and journals.

During our research conferences, we have gone from having *discussants* to having *discussion facilitators*. Gone are the days of presenting your paper and wondering what criticism the discussant might unleash upon you and your research, up to and possibly including questioning your parentage. Mostly, this is a good thing – it makes our conferences safer, more congenial spaces for fledgling researchers.

However, I have to admit some nostalgia for the old school discussants like the late Larry Miller from The Ohio State University. He was the discussant for one of my very first papers and I well knew his reputation for "not suffering fools gladly." Among graduate students the stories were legion. Everyone had a Larry Miller story. So, with a great deal of trepidation, I presented my paper. When I finished Dr. Miller began his comments as I listened nervously, sitting at the front of the room as was then the custom.

Dr. Miller was rightfully noted for his expertise in research methods and statistics, so I was especially nervous about what he might say when he began discussing these aspects of my paper. To my immense surprise he had relatively positive things to say about my methods – I began to feel somewhat better – not so bad I thought. Then he began on my statistical analysis. Again, much to my surprise, he complimented me on my use of factor analysis, multiple analysis of variance, and *post-hoc* ANOVAs. By now, I'm thinking that I've undoubtedly reached the absolute pinnacle of my career – Larry Miller is saying good things about my research!

In retrospect, I probably should have known better; as he concluded with the 21 words I have always remembered; and I quote: "Given the *insignificance* of his research topic, his analysis was much like a carpenter driving a *finishing nail* with a *sledgehammer!*" Dr. Miller was a tough discussant, but, as was his intent, he elevated the relevance and the rigor of our research. I wonder, who are today's Larry Millers? Who are the constructive critics that elevate our scholarly work?

I published my first refereed journal article in 1989 (Johnson et al.). The article was co-authored with Bob Stewart and Richard Linhardt and consisted of six and one-half printed pages, including references. There was no abstract and only 14 references; 10 of these references were from the *Journal of the American Association of Teacher Educators in Agriculture*. There was a brief review of related literature

but there was no theoretical or conceptual framework. A total of 10 articles appeared in this issue of the recently renamed *Journal of Agricultural Education*; eight dealt with school-based agricultural education (SBAE) programs and two related to Extension programs.

In contrast, Volume 66, Issue 1 of the *Journal of Agricultural Education* contained 50 articles: 34 of these dealt with various aspects of SBAE programs, teachers, and students; four dealt with Extension-related issues; and the remaining 12 dealt with a variety of issues including food justice, voting behaviors, college teaching, rural youth development, agricultural communication, and workplace embeddedness, among other topics.

Based on 10 randomly selected articles from this issue, the mean article length was 17.3 pages, and the mean number of references per article was 46.3. In a development I am delighted to see, many of these references were from outside of the agricultural education literature. All quantitative articles included a theoretical framework. This comparison leads me to four conclusions:

First, and most painfully, my 1989 manuscript would *never* be published in today's *Journal of Agricultural Education*; and its rejection would be *fully* justified in light of the progress we have made in our research efforts. As personally painful as this is, I see it as an extremely positive development!

Second, research published in the *Journal of Agricultural Education* still focuses to a large extent on issues related to SBAE and Extension programs; however, there is an ever-growing awareness that research in agricultural education is much broader than these two areas alone. Again, a tremendously positive development!

Third, the increase in number of citations and the greater inclusion of citations from outside of agricultural education are both extremely positive developments. I am immensely pleased to see us increasingly recognize that agricultural education, broadly defined, is an applied discipline, rooted in and dependent on parent disciplines such as psychology, sociology, education, and communication, with teaching and learning, leadership, and communication in agriculture as the context. Situating our research within the broader literature and theory from these parent disciplines can only add rigor and relevance to our work.

Fourth and finally, our research has advanced from being largely atheoretical to being largely theory-based. This is an extremely positive development. Use of sound, appropriate theoretical frameworks can greatly improve the quality and rigor of our research; but, as Kitchel and Ball stated in their excellent 2014 article, only if we apply them in the right ways and for the right reasons. I encourage you all to read Kitchel and Ball for their excellent guidance on the proper use of theoretical frameworks.

Finally, in preparation for today, I looked up the public Google Scholar profiles of the 20 most often cited AAEE researchers who listed "agricultural education" as one of their research areas. I was particularly interested in *where* these individuals publish their research. As expected, I saw numerous citations for articles published in our traditional journals such as the *Journal of Agricultural Education*, the *Journal of Extension*, the *Journal of Applied Communications*, and the *NACTA Journal*, among others. However, what really excited me was the diversity of the journals in which these individuals shared their work. These journals included *Human Resource Development Quarterly*; *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*; *College Student Journal*; *Journal of Experiential Education*; *Children and Youth Services Review*; *International Journal of STEM Education*; *Food, Culture and Society*; *Sustainability*; *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*; *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*; *Computers & Education*; and others.

As one who has long been concerned about the insularity of our research, this was tremendously encouraging to me! By all means, let's continue publishing in our traditional journals. As a profession this

should be a priority. However, let's also make it a priority to share our work with colleagues outside of this room (both literally *and* figuratively!). To me, this is one important characteristic of a mature, confident discipline.

Although we may sometimes be dissatisfied with the pace of progress, I am optimistic about the future. The progress I have seen over my career places our current research efforts orders of magnitude above where they were when I entered the profession. Like excellence in teaching, excellence in research is a journey, not a destination. Let us resolve to continue this journey together.

## Service

Last but not least, let's turn to service. Every faculty member knows there are unlimited needs and opportunities for service. These opportunities can be so numerous and overwhelming that assistant professors are often counselled to avoid service activities whenever possible. In a lot of cases this makes good career sense. Yet, my experience is that carefully chosen service activities, in areas of particular interest or expertise, can greatly enhance a faculty career, provide important networking connections, and, on occasion, result in actual accomplishments.

While there are many venues for service, I want to specifically talk with you about opportunities for service within your universities. Many faculty members seek administrative positions because they want to influence policy and make a broader difference. I have never held an administrative position, but, through my service activities, I believe I have influenced policy and made a positive difference at my university.

As president of the University of Arkansas Teaching Academy, I proposed a campus-wide departmental teaching award, secured approval for the award, and co-chaired the committee that developed the award criteria and selection process. As a result, each year one campus department is recognized with the Daniel E. Ferritor Award for Departmental Excellence in Teaching and receives a check for \$10,000.

As chair of our University Promotion and Tenure Committee, I led a complete revision of our campus policy on faculty appointment, annual review, and promotion and tenure. In a later term as chair, I led the review of policies for appointment and promotion of non-tenure-track faculty.

As co-chair of our University Remote Teaching Taskforce, I helped lead faculty and administrators in the development of our university's teaching response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As chair of the Future of Remote Teaching Task Force, I led colleagues as we examined lessons learned from remote teaching and developed academic policy governing new, hybrid modes of course delivery.

As one of three co-directors of our campus teaching and faculty support center, I had the opportunity to celebrate teaching excellence; coordinate over 100 teaching improvement workshops; plan four multi-day summer teaching camps; coordinate new faculty orientation; and establish a campus-wide peer observation of teaching program.

I share these activities with you *not* to boast, but to make a *very* specific point. Involvement in these service activities has been the best of both worlds – they have provided the opportunity to lead, to impact policy, and to make a positive difference, *all while retaining the best and most important job on any university campus – that of being a faculty member!* So, whether your contributions are in service to your university, to your professional associations, to practitioners, to the general public, or some combination, I encourage you to consider service as an integral, important, and fulfilling component of your faculty career.

## Conclusion

In closing, thank you for listening to me this afternoon! I appreciate your kind attention. I hope I have shared something that has caused you to think in a new way about your work as a faculty member. I hope I have reminded you in some small way of how truly important and life-changing your work as a faculty member really is. At the very least, I hope you have heard something that has made you smile.

As I finish the point rows I have left, I would gladly start back on the long rows and do it all over again – only better this time. But that’s not the way things work. So, to those of you just entering the field and those of you still working the long rows, I’ll leave it to you to do it better; to be kinder; to teach with greater rigor, compassion, and character; to increasingly focus your research on only the most important problems; and to seek opportunities for even greater service. I have every confidence that you can and will!

As you do these things, remember once again the words of Ferris Bueller (Hughes, 1981), “Life moves pretty fast. If you don’t stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it” (00:04:37). So, please take the time to look around and celebrate the moments, both large and small, and the people who make this such a wonderful profession. Believe me; your own point rows will come much sooner than you think!

Thanks again to Tracy for extending me this opportunity! It has been an honor to speak with you this afternoon.

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