

# Winning an External Teaching Award in Higher Education: Teacher Identity and Recipient Characteristics

Kerrie Bethel<sup>1</sup>, Nicholas E. Fuhrman<sup>2</sup>, Carolyn A. Copenheaver<sup>3</sup>, Kathryn C. Hollandsworth<sup>4</sup>

## Abstract

*Many universities and professional associations recognize excellence in teaching with awards; however, research findings on the impact of an award on teaching identity are mixed. The objective of this study was to qualify the impact of receiving a National or Regional United States Department of Agriculture Teaching, Extension, and Research Award (TERA) on teaching identity. Secondly, this study explored how well award-winning teachers' self-identities and behaviors corresponded with recognized characteristics of excellent teaching. A phenomenological approach utilizing semi-structured interviews and researcher reflexivity was used to gather information from 12 TERA recipients. Findings indicate that faculty members recognized for excellence in teaching demonstrate known characteristics of effective teachers, seek guidance from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and feel that teaching continues to be less valued than research in their institutional cultures. Results suggest that departmental and college level administrators can foster subcultures that promote teaching excellence through access to professional development opportunities, support for peer mentoring and evaluation, and revised promotion and tenure policies that recognize teaching effectiveness as a productivity metric.*

**Keywords:** effective teachers; teacher identity; teaching awards; teaching excellence

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## Introduction

Elements associated with excellent teaching provide insight into characteristics of excellent teachers and have demonstrated remarkable consistency over time (Maxwell et al., 2011; Robbs & Broyles, 2012; Roberts et al., 2012; Rosenshine & Furst, 1971; Wilson et al., 2010). Many colleges, universities, and professional societies use characteristics of excellent teaching to evaluate and provide

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<sup>1</sup> Kerrie Bethel is a Ph.D. student in the Odum School of Ecology at the University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, ([kabethel@uga.edu](mailto:kabethel@uga.edu)).

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas E. Fuhrman is a Professor of Environmental Education in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication at the University of Georgia, 135 Four Towers, Athens, GA 30602, ([fuhrman@uga.edu](mailto:fuhrman@uga.edu)).

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn A. Copenheaver is an Associate Professor in the Department of Forest Resources and Environmental Conservation at Virginia Tech, 232 Cheatham Hall, Blacksburg, VA 24061, ([ccopenhe@vt.edu](mailto:ccopenhe@vt.edu)).

<sup>4</sup> Kathryn C. Hollandsworth is a Program Support Technician in the Department of Forest Resources and Environmental Conservation at Virginia Tech, 228 Cheatham Hall, Blacksburg, VA 24061, ([kholland@vt.edu](mailto:kholland@vt.edu)).

recognition through teaching award programs. These awards can bolster faculty confidence and provide affirmation of teaching behaviors. The impact of winning a teaching award may influence a faculty member's future teaching behaviors and identity as an educator. In fact, there is limited qualitative research on the relationship between teaching award acquisition and a faculty members' teaching identity and values about the importance of teaching (Cheng, 2014).

Teaching awards can be viewed as an entire process, from nomination to application to recognition. This process may have benefits and periods of discomfort (Fitzpatrick & Moore, 2015; McCormack et al., 2014; Shephard et al., 2010). Faculty indicate that the process involves learning about oneself and exploring one's identity as a teaching member of an academic community. Perceptions of identity as a teacher can be influenced by one's self view (career level, professional role, and perceived self-efficacy as a teacher), teaching environment (type of university), and disciplinary specialization (Cheng, 2014). The process of earning a teaching award also requires faculty not versed in andragogy or pedagogy to integrate new vocabulary to understand individual approaches to education. Many faculty members report discomfort during the process because of feelings of inadequacy while describing their efforts (Fitzpatrick & Moore, 2015; McCormack et al., 2014).

Teaching award eligibility requirements and application materials often lack characterizations of good teaching, and fewer than 50% of the programs studied by Chism (2006) explicitly define good teaching. Thus, the criteria by which teaching award nominees are evaluated are often unclear. Discrepancies among award programs, levels (departmental, institutional, regional, or national), added values (cash awards, plaques, or other awards), and recipients' academic cultures make assessing impacts of teaching awards quite challenging (Chism & Szabó, 1997). Boyer (1990), while not discussing teaching awards directly, perhaps best describes the difficulty faced by many teaching award programs in evaluating excellent teaching: Scholarship is associated with research, and teaching is viewed as a non-overlapping, discrete task not a part of scholarship. As teaching awards and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) have evolved in concert with universities' needs to fulfill their missions by filling appointments that lend themselves to individual faculty strengths, promotion and tenure guidelines have also evolved. Jackson (2006) notes increasing importance placed on the pedagogical strength of teaching in career advancement for teaching appointments, as well as the support needed to provide teaching faculty with the resources to participate in and engage with SoTL.

Faculty members feel that teaching award programs need to be examined and modified to ensure transparency, reduce tensions, and provide support for teaching and teacher development beyond the award, particularly at the university level (Madriaga & Morley, 2016). Some recipients think awards have been beneficial to their careers and others indicate that winning a teaching award is the "kiss of death" for promotion and tenure because excellence in teaching is often associated with reduced research productivity (Fitzpatrick & Moore, 2015; Layton & Brown, 2011; Madriaga & Morley, 2016; Seppala & Smith, 2019). This attitude is also seen in Chism (2006), who describes teaching awards as having less value than grant attainment and research productivity. These studies do not necessarily indicate that faculty are less likely to apply for or accept a teaching award, but highlight divides when faculty perceive universities as paying lip service to teaching while fundamentally supporting research. Adding nuance to these perceptions is the impact of a faculty member's understanding of the teaching climate of an institution. Faculty who perceive their institution as placing equal weight on research and teaching rate many of the tools used to evaluate promotion and tenure as appropriately emphasized between research productivity and teaching effectiveness (Wattiaux et al., 2010). Thus, the likelihood of faculty applying for teaching awards can be a function of their departmental, college, and university culture.

Assessments of the impacts of teaching awards disparately reveal attitudes in favor of awards and those dubious of award program aims. Much consternation stems from the perception that many teaching award programs exist to bridge the gap in investment between research and teaching in higher education, particularly as faculty are under continued pressure to do more with less (Chism & Szabó,

1997; Mitten & Ross, 2018). Many suggest that teaching award programs need transformation into something more than a symbolic recognition lacking true investment in making teaching equally respected with research (Chism, 2006; Seppala & Smith, 2019; Smith, 2013). Some report a prevailing attitude that teaching awards do little to motivate good teaching practices, because education is guided by an intrinsic motivation to teach and improve for its own sake (Chism & Szabó, 1997). Even if it feels good to be recognized, winning an award does not impact one's approach to teaching (Madriaga & Morley, 2016). In contrast, other recipients note that a teaching award encouraged them to take more risks and trust in their own teaching ability (Cheng, 2014; Robbs & Broyles, 2012; Zhu & Turcic II, 2018). The need to better understand these complex teaching award perceptions and individual impacts led to the present work. It is hoped that the results of this study will be of value during faculty promotion and tenure decisions.

### **Purpose and Research Question**

In this study, we were interested in (a) understanding how Regional or National TERA winners identify themselves as teachers before and after receiving the award, and (b) expanding our ability to characterize whether teaching award programs serve as models of excellent teaching, promote teaching excellence across an institution or discipline, and/or provide opportunities for teaching to be valued equally with research within academia (Chism & Szabó, 1997). This study aligns with Research Priority 4: Meaningful, Engaged Learning in All Environments and Research Priority 5: Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs of the American Association for Agricultural Education National Research Agenda (Roberts et al., 2016). Characterization of award-winning teachers can provide a lens through which to understand any discrepancies between the program's description of teaching excellence and the qualities of excellent teaching exhibited by recipients. These findings may be useful for crafting teaching award applications and providing university faculty and administrators with a sense of the impact of winning a teaching award on the recipient. This study was guided by these research questions:

- (1) How has winning a regional or national teaching award impacted the teaching identity of award-winning teachers?
- (2) How well do the award-winning teachers' self-identities and behaviors align with recognized characteristics of effective teachers?

### **Materials and Methods**

The research questions are exploratory; thus, a qualitative approach was appropriate to provide a rich source of data from which important themes could emerge. Phenomenological research employs a qualitative set of methodologies aimed at providing a nuanced, complete explication of experience. Phenomenology distinguishes itself by deliberately examining the researcher as much as the research subjects. The researcher can explore experiences and their contexts, and is free from a rigid structure or methodology (Vagle, 2018). Study methods and analysis protocols were submitted to the University of Georgia's Institutional Review Board and approved under project number 00002404.

### **Ensuring Trustworthiness and Dependability**

Ensuring the trustworthiness of findings in qualitative research requires intentional study design and we adhered to best practices from the methodological literature to ensure consistency in interpretation and an accurate depiction of participant responses. The resonance of qualitative research is often a hallmark of appropriate rigor, where resonance refers to an intuitive feeling of recognition or the ability to relate to the findings (Tracy, 2013). Creswell and Miller (2000) define validity as "how accurately the account represents participants' realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them," (p. 1) speaking to the necessity for academic rigor in qualitative work to ensure authentic results.

Creswell and Miller (2000) and Va (2000) present tools to ensure validity, including disconfirming evidence, peer debriefing, member-checking, and researcher reflexivity. Disconfirming evidence and collaboration are addressed by seeking out alternative explanations for identified themes, through individual continued analysis, interrater discussion, and member-checking. Member-checking provides the opportunity for subjects to collaborate with researchers by being afforded the opportunity to review, clarify, supplement, or change anything presented in the data. Reflexive practices include epoché and bridling, as described by van Manen (2014), Vagle, (2009), and Dahlberg and Dahlberg (2003). To ensure trustworthiness, we engaged in member-checking by sharing a summary of themes which emerged from the interviews with participants for their review and approval. The research team reviewed a selection of transcripts and compared themes identified independently by each team member. The researchers then integrated themes and discussed their meaning. We engaged in a peer-debriefing discussion of the themes which emerged from individual interviews following an independent analysis of the data by each researcher to address interrater consistency.

Epoché, described by van Manen (2014), is an intentionally practiced thinking style aiming to disengage with the natural attitude. The researcher's reflexivity throughout data collection requires attending to the context of the researcher, the participants, and the phenomenon. This freedom to explore the context provides additional opportunities to situate the phenomenon and understand the structures within and outside it. Bridling asks researchers to remain skeptical, doggedly interrogate researcher assumptions, and even question their interest (Vagle, 2009). Bridling exists to "slacken" ties to understanding – "to not make definite that which is indefinite" through reckless understanding (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2003).

### **Study Population**

The National Food and Agricultural Sciences Teaching, Extension, and Research Awards (TERA) Program recognizes excellence in college and university teaching of agriculture in the United States. The program was established by the United States Secretary of Agriculture and is administered through a partnership of the United States Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU), and college and university administrators and faculty members. The program annually recognizes excellence in agricultural instruction in three categories: (1) two National Awards and four Regional Awards for faculty members who have demonstrated excellence in teaching while maintaining a substantial research/extension program and contributing to academic service; (2) two New Teacher Awards for individuals who have demonstrated excellence in teaching but have less than seven years of teaching service; and (3) four Teaching and Student Engagement Awards distributed among the four geographic regions, recognizing excellence in teaching among individuals who have a 75% or higher teaching load who are not required to support a substantial research/extension program. The National and Regional Awards have been part of the TERA Program since its 1992 inception; the New Teacher Awards and the Teaching and Student Engagement Awards (established in 2007 and 2018, respectively) were developed in recognition of the diverse instructors who contribute to agricultural higher education. The existence of almost three decades' worth of National and Regional Award winners provided a unique opportunity to explore the impact of winning a major teaching award on a faculty member's teaching identity; therefore, we limited our population to National and Regional TERA winners.

### **Data Collection and Participants**

Purposive sampling was employed to gather experiences from a subset of TERA winners. Names of past National and Regional TERA winners were provided by the Executive Director of the Board of Agriculture Assembly Academic Programs for APLU. Study participants were limited to active (non-emeritus) faculty members within institutions of higher education and administrators who have held an active teaching appointment within the previous three years. One study participant was selected from each year (1992-2019), with National winners preferentially selected over Regional

winners unless the selection of a Regional winner allowed representation of a wider number, diversity, or geographic range of colleges and universities. National TERA recipients are often prior Regional winners.

Potential participants were recruited for the study through their institutionally affiliated e-mail addresses. Following agreement, informed consent was sent via e-mail and the interview was scheduled. Informed consent was reviewed with each participant at the beginning of the interview. The semi-structured interview guide was informed by a literature review and designed to probe for richer, relevant data as the experiences of the participants and their personal and professional trajectories were revealed. Reflexive journaling before data collection and after each interview was also utilized and was a source of data used throughout analysis. Interviews were audio- and video-recorded and lasted between 52 and 86 minutes.

Twenty potential participants were contacted, and 12 participants agreed to participate. They were evenly split by gender, with six men and six women. R1 institutions were over-represented, consistent with the potential pool, with 10 R1 institutions and two Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Five participants were in the North Central region of the United States, three each in the Western and Southern regions, and one in the Northeastern region. On average, participants had 29 years of faculty experience, ranging from 13 to 35 years. The average length of teaching experience at the time of winning the award was nearly 18 years, with a range of 6 to 34 years. The average number of years that had passed since winning the award was 11.5, with a high degree of variability and a range of 1 to 27 years. This range represents the entire history of the award program, with participants from both the first and most recent award years.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim from recordings. Transcriptions and initial thoughts from the researchers were sent to participants to member-check and offer the opportunity to clarify any statements they felt necessary (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Gillham, 2000). One participant did request that a specific response be redacted and removed from analysis, as they felt it did not translate well into text and could be easily misconstrued. All other participants responded affirmatively to preliminary themes and validated the provided transcripts. All identifiable information in the transcripts, including names of colleagues and students, was disidentified. Codes were used for institutions based on their type, e.g., R1.

Qualitative content analysis was used to summarize, examine, and aggregate the data into emergent themes across the dataset. This allowed for further interpretation and the treatment of textual data to identify the potential for multiple meanings as surface and latent content (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Analysis from holistic and line-by-line readings identified themes that occurred and reoccurred within and across interviews, as well as areas of disagreement between individual experiences that highlighted additional areas for future inquiry. These procedures brought the data together and then pulled it apart into resonant, digestible quotes that served as exemplars highlighting the dominant undercurrents, which could be characterized in this study as abductive, low-abstraction, high-interpretation analysis (Graneheim et al., 2017). It is only through this process – through the levels of the text as a whole; as excerpts, selections, or single paragraphs within; and as single lines, phrases, or descriptions – that the phenomena can be revealed.

### **Subjectivity Statement**

The lead author, although not a faculty member, has experience as a teaching assistant, invited classroom speaker, informal program developer and leader, and university staff member charged with helping undergraduates navigate research experiences. The other co-authors have served as faculty and staff members at major land-grant universities for 13, 20 and 33 years. Both faculty members have earned university teaching awards and regional or national teaching awards from professional societies.

## **Limitations**

Our study is exploratory and used purposive sampling to generate resonant, nuanced understandings from the identities and experiences of professors who have been recognized for excellence in teaching through an external award. While the participant invitation process aimed to provide a diverse and thorough representation of award winners, R1 institutions are over-represented, as are white participants. We did not actively pursue those who did not respond to our initial request for participation beyond a single reminder email. Therefore, those who did not respond may place a lower value on being a recipient of a teaching award. The results of this study are not generalizable but provide important perspectives and additional questions for further research.

## **Results**

The interview data provided thick descriptions of the experiences of faculty members recognized for excellence in teaching and revealed common characteristics as well as perceived barriers to and gateways for the elevation of effective teaching. Seven themes emerged, including (1) influential others, (2) humble orientation, (3) intrinsic motivation, (4) evidence-based practice, (5) student-centeredness, (6) reflection and personal growth, and (7) institutional culture and identity.

### **Influential Others**

Participants often described their successes within stories of influential others in their personal, academic, and professional lives who saw potential in them. Most participants offered stories of being inspired by great teachers when they were students. Additionally, as faculty members, participants were supported by influential administrators and colleagues who pushed them to apply for awards, accept career-advancing positions, and offered support to attend professional development workshops. For example, one participant noted the influence of a former undergraduate advisor:

I had a very influential undergraduate advisor who appeared to see something in me that I had not seen in myself and provided constant encouragement in becoming an agricultural education teacher.

Other participants identified the importance of past teachers on their career:

My ag teacher that brought me to [R1] and said I should be an ag teacher is what decided I should be a teacher. He clearly saw something in me, because women weren't doing that at that time.

I pretty much knew I wanted to go into the academic world through the influence of some really good teachers I had.

Mentoring relationships continued to be an important part of their careers even when the participants were working as faculty members:

An assistant dean [. . .] contacted me about applying for the award. [. . .] I credit him for reviewing the application I first did and making some improvements in the application [. . .] the first time I applied, I didn't get it. I remember him calling me and asking me if I got the evaluation from the application, and he asked if he could see it. I sent it to him, and it was really very positive and so he said, we're going to do this again next year.

Participants spoke with heart-felt emotion about the role of these influential individuals in inspiring them to submit an award application. Without their encouragement, it was clear that several of our participants would not have applied.

### **Humble Orientation**

Participants tended to characterize their accomplishments as good fortune, or downplay their own roles in their achievement. This humble orientation to their identities as people and faculty

members was revealed in the language used to describe their interactions with others. Several participants noted not seeing themselves as being as effective in their teaching as other colleagues and would rather the attention be placed on someone else, sharing excerpts such as:

I've received [quite a few teaching awards] over the years, most of the time I don't know I'm being nominated for them. And then I feel honestly like I'm getting them for doing my job. This is what you're supposed to do to be a good teacher. [. . .] I think I should be nominating other faculty for awards. So that's kind of what I do. I have nominated tons of other faculty for awards that they have received. And I think that's what I should be doing. I don't think I should be nominating myself for awards.

Some participants recognized excellence in teaching in other award winners, but were unable to see their own comparable talents, an indication they were experiencing imposter syndrome:

I really felt good to think I was there [at the teaching awards ceremony] with these people who have been teachers. I think these people should be honored. I don't know how I got here. All my family's in [City], I'm having fun. I'm dressed up. But honestly, some of the ways that folks were describing [these award winners] I was like, man, that's awesome. I'm so happy for them. I don't know why I'm here.

### **Intrinsic Motivation**

Excellent teachers are motivated from within to continually improve. This is demonstrated in continued alignment with a philosophy grounded in intrinsic rewards felt from self-improvement and student success, and the perception that teaching is a calling for those who want to do it rather than something at which one excels in search of extrinsic rewards. This idea of teaching as a calling emerged during our conversations with participants:

Because we care about it. I am one of those, I don't know, maybe rare people anymore, who think that teachers are born, they aren't made. It's an attitude. It's a view of the world, and your place in it. It's an intense curiosity and this desire to understand and to explain. That's a mentality. [. . .] To me, it's, it's just a matter of being curious and wanting to transfer that sense of curiosity and understanding, logic and thought to whoever's interested.

A similar sentiment was expressed by another participant who emphasized the need to share their knowledge with others:

There must have been something in me from the very beginning about, man, this knowledge that exists out there is something that you need to learn to know, but it never was about me. It was about sharing it with others.

A sense of continual improvement was especially prominent through reflections which indicated an internal desire to impact the lives of students by simply caring about their success:

They need to care. They really need to care. Everything else will follow if they care. [. . .] I believe that there's a foundation there in caring that will make you do the other things you need to do to be excellent.

### **Evidence-Based Practice**

The participants, across disciplines, spoke often of the role that the teaching and learning literature played in influencing their orientation toward effective teaching. The vocabulary of SoTL was employed more often in the interviews with faculty who are scholars in the field of teaching and learning, but the importance of staying up to date with pedagogical practice was shared by many. One participant described substantial effort in continuing their own education about SoTL:

I had a chance to go to a week-long workshop [. . .] It was really informative because it made me think about the way that I was offering instruction and the way that I was structuring the

material that was being offered in class. [. . .] And that was in many ways a major revolutionary change in the way I approached things in the classroom. It made me think about how, you know, looking at it from a learner-centered perspective, looking at it with regards to ways of offering instruction that are different from a standard lecture format.

Other participants shared stories of their efforts to gather information about the effectiveness of their teaching from students and outside sources:

The excellence part, I think, is really using the latest understanding and pedagogy about how students learn best. [. . .] I'm always learning, what's working, what's not working, I learn from the students. I do a lot of formative and summative assessments to, you know, keep it going.

I was informing my own practice with the research I was doing that was disseminating information to other teaching professors, but informing my own practice at the same time, and so gosh, what a great world to be walking in.

Participants placed a significant priority on continuously improving their craft and informing such improvement with empirically collected data on their teaching effectiveness that would ultimately enhance the learning experience for their students.

### **Student-Centeredness**

Participants often described orientations toward teaching as student- or learner-centered, or described engagement with students as opposed to students being passive receivers of information. Others expressed that moving away from traditional or professorial lectures provided opportunities for students to have agency in their educational development. For some, this was a departure from their experiences as students and their training as researchers as they evaluated their teaching practice. Some participants identified their personal shift toward student-centered learning:

Ultimately you want students to be able to say, I need you to tell me about this. I need to understand this. And that's the outcome, I think, of a learner-centered classroom as opposed to a professorial-centered classroom. It's a philosophical paradigm shift that took me a bit to wrap my head around, because that isn't where I came from. But once I made that shift it completely changed the approach in the classroom.

In contrast, another participant noted a consistency throughout their career of having a student-centered teaching philosophy:

I think this has been kind of my philosophy from the very beginning, is that it's not about me as the instructor. [. . .] They need to see for themselves why that topic is relevant to them, to their family, to their community, and the bigger world out there, and how they could possibly use the topic as a way to move forward in their career. As opposed to just oh, this is just another course that I have to take in order to graduate.

Even experienced teachers noted that creating a student-centered learning environment requires constant maintenance and flexibility:

Combining different techniques to give the students more learning capacity is really important in excellence in teaching. It's really hard to get away from, you know, they call it the "sage on the stage," pouring information in one direction. It's really hard to get away from that the way, particularly with large classes. But it's possible, and there's all kinds of techniques for doing it.

Our participants believed in giving students a sense of ownership in their learning, implying that faculty must be flexible with content delivery and willing to try non-traditional student engagement techniques without the fear of failure.

### **Reflection and Personal Growth**

The interviews revealed an emphasis on reflection as an integral component of continued growth in effective teaching. Participants recognized the value of reflection when putting together a nomination packet and expressed that no matter the outcome of the award selection, they had won simply by taking the time to really reflect on their teaching. Other participants did not stipulate that reflection was undertaken specifically when necessary for external requests, but instead focused on the need for repeated, intentional reflection to improve educational practices:

When you do these packages and ask yourself, did I really do all of that? Maybe that's why I was so tired (laughs). It forces you to put all these things on paper that you don't think about. [. . .] You have self-reflection, and in addition to looking at the amount of things you have done [and makes you think] I could do this differently, I could grow some more in this area, because teaching is about change.

Others believed that self-reflection was an opportunity for retrospective musing on their teaching identity:

It's kind of good when you have to reflect on what you've done. I mean, so often we are just going forward, and we don't have those times to stop and reflect on, these are the things that people really thought about the coursework, and these are the things that I've developed, and what is my teaching philosophy? So it was good from that point of view.

Some participants felt that winning the award was secondary to the opportunity that the application process provided for self-reflection:

Writing my own nomination is a fabulous exercise of reflection on your own teaching. [. . .] Truth of the matter is, you're probably the first and foremost beneficiary of that process, whether you win or not. Because you engaged in the process of reflection.

### **Institutional Culture and Identity**

Participants held some common views on institutional cultures across different disciplines and institution types, but also expressed a variety of individual experiences within those cultures. Some expressed a tacit understanding of institutional culture but experienced a difference within their department or discipline outside of the larger institution, while others expressed frustration or disappointment with an inability to transform their immediate cultural norms. Respondents shared the prevailing attitude that research is more valued than teaching at research universities, that balancing the multiple missions of the university required additional work not credited in appointments, and that disciplinary scholarship is the metric by which tenure and promotion opportunities arise, as noted by one participant:

I recognize the fact that awards are important. Awards are important for tenure and promotion too, in this case for promotion to the next level, so being recognized at the national level, the regional level, for a teaching award is a great recognition.

The conflict between teaching and research was particularly an issue for participants from research universities:

It is very common in R1, research institutions, that winning a teaching award is the kiss of death. So it is not well-respected, and it gets shoved under the rug, but it's reality and fact. And so it was important to me that I've also won some research awards, and that became more important after winning a teaching award, because of that reputation in R1 institutions. It became more important to me that I increase my scholarly contributions so that I could be known as a researcher and how important both are in the academy.

However, some participants noted that even within a research university, pockets of administrators who value teaching exist:

We've been lucky in our department, in our college, in our university, teaching has been valued. Of course there are still some faculty who only value research, and they can be quick to make comments about that, but I think I was lucky that I was in a department where good teaching was valued.

Much of what participants shared regarding their institution's culture related to their perceptions of their institution's criteria for promotion and tenure. In the reflections of our participants, if teaching effectiveness is not explicitly communicated in promotion and tenure documents, it must not be as valued as scholarship. When teaching effectiveness was valued and communicated as being significant in evaluating faculty, participants acknowledged that such an appreciation was somewhat rare in research universities.

### **Discussion**

The study participants were Regional or National USDA TERA recipients for excellence in agricultural and related sciences education. We investigated how teaching award winners understand their identities as teachers before and after receiving a regional or national teaching award, and whether teaching award programs serve as models of excellent teaching, promote teaching excellence across an institution or discipline, and/or provide opportunities for teaching to be valued equally with research within the academic community (Chism & Szabó, 1997).

#### **What Do Teaching Awards Do?**

Previous literature indicated that faculty members who apply for and/or receive teaching awards appreciate the opportunity and recognition but continue to perceive the culture of higher education institutions as valuing research productivity over teaching effectiveness (Chism, 2006). Faculty members who viewed their institution as equally valuing teaching and research felt more positively about the promotion and tenure process with regard to attention spent on these efforts (Wattiaux et al., 2010). Similarly, our results suggest that the perceived impact of teaching awards on career trajectories may be moderated by the institutional culture or departmental subculture.

#### **Institutional Culture**

All participants described a prevailing attitude in their institutions whereby research and teaching are valued differently, which is consistent with previous literature (Chism, 2006; Chism & Szabó, 1997; Frame et al., 2006; Smith, 2013). Two participants discussed this as a cyclic system where universities alternate between valuing the education of students versus prioritizing externally funded research. In other studies faculty members perceived variation in attitudes towards research versus teaching which varied across departments, colleges, and the broader university (Smith, 2013). Departments may value teaching during a period when the university values research; thus, cycles of teaching vs. research emphasis are not in synchrony at all levels. Participants cited the creation of teaching award programs, teaching professorships, and revised promotion and tenure practices as evidence of policies implemented to support the retention and promotion of faculty members who value teaching. This is congruent with previous findings that institutional value structures must also reward teaching recognition for awards to be valuable to winners (Frame et al., 2006; Smith, 2013).

Faculty members suggested that teaching awards may paradoxically promote research activity because winning a teaching award is the "kiss of death," a phrase seen in the literature (Madriaga & Morley, 2016; Seppala & Smith, 2019), where receiving a teaching award brands a faculty member as a "teaching professor" as opposed to a research scholar. Winning a teaching award prompted a faculty member to shift focus and energy onto research lest they lose their reputation as a disciplinary scholar among their peers. This attitude suggests that negative cultural cognitions about teaching at research institutions remain, despite efforts to elevate the importance of teaching. In contrast, several participants expressed positive opinions of teaching awards and felt they were valued by their departments in promotion and tenure review, a view supported by the research of Seppala and Smith (2019).

Participants felt that although teaching awards were appreciated by administrators because they could be highlighted in press releases, the awards ultimately did not promote a cultural shift towards valuing excellence in teaching beyond the individual faculty member. This is supported by Chism (2006), who highlighted both the discomfort felt by applicant evaluators to prescriptively define excellent teaching, and the general perceptions of teaching awards as performative or symbolic executions by institutional administration to indicate that they value teaching.

Participants also described variable individual experiences in their efforts to promote excellence in teaching within their universities, even prior to being a TERA recipient. Several felt that their institutions were shifting toward a culture of valuing teaching, and noted that they participated in or led workshops to improve teaching effectiveness and implemented peer evaluations of teaching within their department. Such “systemic opportunities to improve teaching” (Smith, 2013, p. 5) have been shown to be valuable to teaching faculty (Maxwell et al., 2011; Seppala & Smith, 2019; Smith, 2013). Other participants expressed frustration that colleagues were unwilling to improve their teaching methods or teaching evaluation systems, a view expressed in prior work (Smith, 2013) but conflicting with the perceptions of administrators on the effectiveness of such programs (DiBenedetto & Whitwell, 2019). These disparate experiences underscore how institutional and departmental cultures may impact how teaching awards and excellent teaching are valued.

### **Teaching Awards: Validation or Catalyst?**

Surface-level responses of participants uniformly indicated that winning a teaching award did not impact their orientation toward teaching, a finding echoed by Madriaga and Morley (2016). Most participants explained that effective teachers are intrinsically motivated, a view also shared by literature findings (Chism & Szabó, 1997; McNaught & Anwyl, 1993) though some literature has indicated that excellent teachers believe teachers are created through intentional growth, not born excellent (Robbs & Broyles, 2012). The participating faculty members expressed that they care about doing a good job and feel a sense of obligation toward their students. This sense of duty motivates them to seek out literature from SoTL, conduct formative and summative assessments with their students, adopt student-centered classrooms, and participate in professional development activities to enhance their classroom effectiveness, actions in alignment with superior teaching through continued growth (Goldsmid et al., 1977; Lang et al., 2010; Maxwell et al., 2011). These results indicate that teaching awards recognize good practice, validating efforts rather than serving as an impetus to transform methods or examine practices. While the faculty members did not indicate that the award impacted their identities, those identities necessarily led them to continued improvement.

Despite the outward assertion that teaching awards had no impact on their teaching identity, participants noted that winning the award intensified their sense of obligation to continue to be an effective teacher. The award seemed to mark a specific point in time after which they continued to progress toward becoming more scholarly teachers, congruent with award winners citing motivation to continue to explore innovative teaching in Zhu and Turcic II (2018), despite more participants indicating the award as a catalyst in that study. In our results, participants often spoke to the transformational nature of preparing their award packet, particularly how assembling it prompted reflection. During this process, several participants noted a feeling of unhomeliness, supporting the notion that reflection can stir up discomfort (McCormack et al., 2014). Discomfort stemmed from various areas, from realizing the impact a teaching professor has on large numbers of students to confronting feelings of inadequacy or inability to articulate their methods using the language of educational scholarship. They noted that these reflections often intensified their sense of obligation to become a better educator.

Participants spoke about the process of applying and receiving the award as an impetus to consider new ways to engage their students, become involved in the SoTL, and “design good learning environments” (as one participant noted) for their students. Others indicated that reflection is an

important tool in effective teaching practice and that their academic schedules seldom provide intentional opportunities to engage in reflection. They appreciated the opportunity provided by the award process because the act of documenting their teaching activities provided a sense of validation, separately from winning the award. This is corroborated in Fitzpatrick and Moore (2015), where faculty members also expressed the positive impact of reflecting on their work through award applications.

Several participants described the award process as assistive, helping prepare them to document their activities for promotion and tenure and other applications. They described referring to their award applications when developing other documents. These experiences indicate that while being selected for the award may not prompt self-identified changes in teaching identity, the act of engaging with the process provides an opportunity to examine their teaching identities and motivations, leading to continued evolution of their teaching identities and methods. This is tied to a move to increasingly incorporate scholarly teaching principles in promotion and tenure dossiers (Jackson, 2006).

### **Who Wins Teaching Awards?**

Elements of effective teaching have been the subject of much scholarship and have demonstrated consistency over time (Maxwell et al., 2011; Robbs & Broyles, 2012; Roberts et al., 2012; Rosenshine & Furst, 1971; Wilson et al., 2010). These elements can often be described as both character traits and behaviors, such as enthusiasm, while others rely on individual preparation, such as content knowledge. The question of whether the elements recognized by teaching awards demonstrate characteristics of effective teaching or serve as catalysts for teaching more effectively has been less explored. The results of this study reveal that many of the TERA-recognized teachers were familiar with and actively pursued the incorporation of effective teaching elements, and that participation in the award process exposed some of them to the SoTL. Additionally, the importance of department and college administrators in soliciting and encouraging award applications was discovered in this study.

### **Recognizing Others**

All participants recognized the impacts of other people in their careers, including family, teachers, and academic colleagues and supervisors. Overwhelmingly, participants also indicated that they generally do not nominate themselves for recognition, preferring to mentor or recognize others rather than shine light on their own achievements. This conflicts with the finding that awards may be seen as divisive among colleagues (Madriaga & Morley, 2016). Nine of the 12 participants were nominated by administrators, and one by students working with administrators. Only two participants self-nominated and worked with their administrators to apply. Many faculty members said they were unaware of the award until they were encouraged to apply by a department chair or other close administrator, reinforcing the importance of engaged administrators in nomination processes. Departments or colleges with supportive administrators are more likely to identify and encourage award applications than institutions with less engaged administrators.

The TERA recipients were humble about their accomplishments and often attributed their advancement or recognition to good fortune and the supportive environments in which they were given the resources and opportunity to thrive. However, faculty members in disciplines outside agricultural education or agricultural communication were less likely to describe the departmental teaching environment as positive. This indicates a need for further investigation into departmental or disciplinary attitudes toward teaching and administrations that provide resources and support for faculty members to pursue teaching recognition, a need also noted by Smith (2013).

### **Characteristics of Effective Teachers**

Participants' teaching identities were apparent through descriptions of their motivations and teaching philosophies. TERA recipients actively seek out new information to enhance teaching effectiveness. They focus on the characterization of excellent teaching as transforming the professor's role as a dispenser of disciplinary content into someone who creates an educational environment

wherein teachers and students are equally engaged in the learning process. They view themselves as facilitating student learning rather than dispensing factual information and describe a variety of roles they employ in relating to students – coach, storyteller, mentor, collaborator, also shown through the emphasis on creating student relationships in Maxwell et al. (2011). These teaching identities align with adult learners who need to have agency or ownership in their education, and who benefit from teachers who demonstrate how material is relevant for each student, allowing them to meaningfully engage with the content (Merriam, 2001). Participants also described the importance of many elements associated with effective teaching, including enthusiasm, variability, flexibility, the preparedness, and the importance of feedback, initially described in Rosenshine and Furst (1971). This indicates TERA recipients had a deep understanding of the elements of effective teaching, displayed through descriptions of valuable and rewarding interactions with students, whether they knew it or not.

Many participants expressed a broad interest in elevating teaching through the use of SoTL. They were interested in recharacterizing effective teaching as teaching from an evidentiary base and expressed concern that the phrase “excellent teaching” was viewed as award-winning rather than as a goal for all faculty members. They expressed the desire to use a more widely relatable label such as “scholarly teaching” as a means to encourage faculty to take advantage of professional development opportunities to introduce them to SoTL, aligning with the excellence “hierarchy” noted by Madriaga and Morley (2016, p. 5). Through exposure to changes they see in their students, faculty members begin to incorporate tenets of SoTL in their classrooms and become effective educators. This response indicates that the TERA National and Regional Award Program successfully identifies effective teachers who continue to grapple with the meaning of excellent teaching and strive not only to improve, but to share the rewards of scholarly teaching with others.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Our findings indicate that faculty members recognized for excellence in teaching demonstrate known characteristics of effective teachers, seek guidance from the SoTL, and feel that teaching continues to be less valued than research in their institutional cultures. Participants unequivocally stated that winning a teaching award did not impact their identities as teaching professors or their teaching philosophies, but their conversations revealed that changes did occur in reflection of their identity and process of describing their teaching philosophy in the application process.

Future research should incorporate a variety of methods and diverse populations to continue to investigate the impacts of teaching awards on individuals, departments, and institutions, and aim to disentangle their interrelationships. The influence of administrators uncovered in this work indicates a need for additional work to understand how, when, why, and with whom administrators choose to share opportunities of external teaching awards with their faculty. Further work is also needed to describe the impact of teaching awards on promotion and tenure evaluation practices and how the valuation of teaching awards changes over time, across universities, and across administrative units of institutions. Specifically, additional research is needed on how administrators perceive faculty success in the context of winning teaching awards. Participants also suggested the need for rigorous and reliable methods for evaluating teaching effectiveness, including a need for education research to create, test, and compare evaluative tools.

The responses shared by the award-winning faculty members in this study suggest several recommendations to enhance teaching effectiveness and the institutional culture of teaching: provide platforms for teaching award winners to share teaching methods and SoTL with peers at the institutional level; promote professional development opportunities focused on enhancing teaching effectiveness, especially for junior faculty; and create or promote faculty mentoring relationships with colleagues for assistance with award applications, peer evaluation of teaching, and knowledge sharing. One practical implication of this research is to provide context for how teaching awards are viewed during promotion and tenure decisions. We urge promotion and tenure committees to view teaching awards as an

acknowledgement of excellence and not set winning awards as an expectation for all faculty, which would diminish the value of the award.

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