

**WHO IS DRIVING THE PICKUP TRUCK?  
A CALL FOR PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP**  
AAAE Distinguished Lecture, San Antonio, TX, May 26, 2005

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I doubt if there is much sociological research examining the seating arrangement of people riding in pickup trucks. However, for those of us who grew up doing farm or ranch work, we are very much aware of the significance of the seating arrangement in a pickup truck. Typically, there are three seating positions in a pickup truck; the driver, the person sitting in the middle, and the person riding shotgun.

The most significant or important position is the driver. Often, the driver is the owner of the truck and the owner of the farm. Typically, this person is in charge and is older or more mature than the other occupants. The safety and welfare of the occupants depend upon the driving skills of this individual. Being the driver is an important position and requires the person to assume considerable responsibility.

The next most important rider is the shotgun position. This person may have to get out and open gates, remove obstacles in the road, pump gas or perform other similar tasks. There may be times when this person can just lean out the window and enjoy the breeze but there are times when this person is very active in assisting the driver to accomplish the trip goals.

The least important position is riding in the middle. This person typically doesn't get out to open gates or perform any other responsibilities. This person may not be as strong as the other people in the pickup. He or she is just along for the ride.

Then of course, there is always the possibility of riding in the bed of the truck. That is where the hired hands or kids ride. It is the lowest status position of all.

If we were to assume that the pickup truck represents the profession of agricultural education, the question I would raise is, "Where are the university agricultural educators sitting?" Are we

driving, riding shotgun, sitting in the middle, or sitting in the back (bed of the truck)?

The university agricultural educators who attended the annual conference of the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) in San Antonio, Texas in May of 2005 were asked this question. Using an electronic audience response system they responded as follows:

- University agricultural educators are driving – 3%
- University agricultural educators are riding shotgun – 52%
- University agricultural educators are sitting in the middle – 32%
- University agricultural educators are riding in the back – 13%

It is clear from the responses, that university agricultural educators are not driving the profession. I concur with this assessment. While half of the respondents indicated the university agricultural educators are riding shotgun, I am not sure I would agree. What evidence is there to support this view? It might be instructive to ask a group of agriculture teachers and state supervisors the same question. Just what is their perception of us? Are we providing leadership to the profession?

University agricultural educators have been accused of sitting in ivory towers and dabbling in esoteric research that doesn't have much relevance to the real world. There are those who view what we do as somewhat peripheral to the mission of agricultural education. One of the objectives of this presentation is to encourage us to think about the worth of what we do and to examine whether we really are providing leadership to the profession.

At one time it was very clear who was driving the profession—the supervisors. When the conference attendees were asked

the question, "Prior to 1963, who was driving the agricultural education truck?" the responses were as follows:

- Federal Supervisors – 37%
- State Supervisors – 37%
- Teacher Educators – 6%
- Agriculture Teachers – 20%

During the Smith-Hughes era the state and federal supervisors were clearly providing the leadership for agricultural education. I contend the federal supervisors were driving, the state supervisors were riding shotgun, the teacher educators were sitting in the middle, and the agriculture teachers were riding in the bed of the truck.

State and federal supervisors were responsible for the rules, regulations, and operation of the program. There were a plethora of forms and reports that agriculture teachers had to fill out. The state supervisors could threaten to withhold vocational funding from a school. State supervisors even had a say in who was hired at the university as teacher educators.

Are the supervisors still driving the pickup truck of agricultural education today? They might in a few selected states, but the Vocational Education Act of 1963 diminished the power of supervisors. Section 16 of the 1963 act stated,

Nothing contained in this part shall be construed to authorize any department, agency, officer, or employee of the United States to exercise any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel of any educational institution or school system.

The first fallout of this provision occurred at the federal level. When this legislation was passed there were 14 federal employees with some type of responsibility for agricultural education. Today there are two. A similar reduction in the supervisory force occurred in many states. The professional leadership provided by supervisors has been dramatically reduced.

So who has stepped up to fill the leadership void in the profession? In the early 1980s, the National Council for

Agricultural Education was created, partially in response to the decline in federal leadership. The National Council is an overarching umbrella of organizations that represent all members of the agricultural education family. The vision statement of the National Council is "The National Council for Agricultural Education will be the premier leadership organization for shaping and strengthening school-based agricultural education (SBAE)."

About the same time the National Council started flexing its muscle, the National FFA Organization started venturing into new territory. During the 1980s and 1990s the National FFA implemented a number of new initiatives such as Local Program Success. This, along with other new FFA programs, was viewed by some to be outside the purview of the FFA. Instead of focusing just on FFA members and their issues, the National FFA began to focus more widely on the field of agricultural education. It was not uncommon to hear phrases such as the tail is wagging the dog?

What were the university agricultural educators doing during this era? Were they stepping forward to provide leadership to the profession? The past 30 years has been an era of diversification in university agricultural education. Many traditional teacher education programs expanded to include extension education, agricultural communications and leadership development. I would suggest that we have primarily been focused inward and not outward during this era.

So exactly who is providing the leadership for the agricultural education profession today? The attendees at the AAAE conference were asked, "Who is driving the agricultural education pickup truck today?" The responses were as follows:

- Federal Officials (Case/Harris) – 1%
- National FFA Organization – 33%
- National Council for Agricultural Education – 22%
- Association for Career and Technical Education – 3%
- None of the Above – 40%

The above results are revealing. One third of the university agricultural educators believe the National FFA is providing the leadership for the profession. The National Council is viewed as the leader by 1 in 5. However, 40% of the university agricultural educators selected "None of the above." Does this mean some other group such as the National Association of Agricultural Educators or the American Association for Agricultural Education is providing the leadership or does it mean there is no readily identifiable group providing the leadership for the field?

I believe we have two groups that are primarily providing leadership for the profession. Those two groups are the National FFA and the National Council. However, it appears there may still be a leadership vacuum. Perhaps no one is really in charge. Much more can be done. It is my contention that we, the university agricultural educators, are not providing the leadership to the profession that we should. We have abrogated our responsibility to provide leadership. What have we done lately to improve the profession? What is the impact of our research (if any)? It is time we step to the plate. We, individually and as an organization, must become proactive in providing leadership to the profession. We need to get behind the steering wheel of the agricultural education pickup truck!

### What Needs to Be Done

There are several areas in which university agricultural educators can and should provide more leadership. The first area is with the supervised agricultural experience (SAE) program. We have espoused the philosophy that FFA, SAE and classroom are all important components of the agricultural education program and draw three equal size intersecting circles to illustrate this concept. But in reality, the circles are not equal in size. The AAEE conference attendees were asked the question, "In your state which circle is the largest?" The responses were:

- Instruction – 36%
- FFA – 58%
- SAE – 5%
- They are all the same – 0%

A recent survey of state supervisory staff found that 26 states do not have a state approved SAE record book? Whose fault is this? How can we let this happen? In several states the teachers themselves have developed an Excel version of a SAE record book. Since university agricultural educators train the future teachers, and we teach about SAE, it is irresponsible of us to send out teachers who are not taught to fill out the SAE record book. If there is no record book, we should take the initiative and develop one. However, we have passively let SAE slide.

In the fall of 2005 or spring of 2006 the National FFA will release a SAE compact disk that has SAE lesson plans, PowerPoint presentations, sample record books, completed proficiency award forms, tips for implementing SAE, record keeping information, and other SAE related content. Should the national FFA really be doing this? They saw a need and stepped forward. If the university agricultural educators had exerted the leadership they should have, the FFA would not have had to do this.

Another area that desperately needs leadership from the university agricultural educators is in preparing a quantity of well qualified agriculture teachers. And this is what we are supposed to be doing! Our efforts in this area are woefully inadequate. The teacher education curriculum in many of our institutions is not what it should be. Many institutions do not have a plan for recruiting more teachers into the profession. We just hope that students will show up at the door. Preparing teachers is a major component of many of our programs and we need to become more serious about this.

In a number of New England and mid-Atlantic states, teacher educators in agriculture have retired and have not been replaced. There are several states with no "real" teacher preparation program in

agricultural education. Students who want to teach in these states may get technical agriculture courses and general teacher education preparation, but they don't get agricultural education training. If we sit idly by and say OK, does this mean there is no value in what we do in agricultural education?

As a profession, we must take the leadership in developing a plan to help states with no agricultural teacher education program. When a teacher educator retires and is not replaced we need to send a delegation to visit that university and encourage the university to either hire an agricultural teacher educator or seek other means to prepare a quality agriculture teacher. With the growth of distance education, it would be relatively easy to deliver agricultural education to those universities via distance education technologies.

Federal legislation is another critical area that needs leadership from the university agricultural educators. Agricultural education is no longer adequately served by the Perkins Act. It is time for a new piece of federal legislation specifically for agricultural education. This does not mean we should divorce ourselves from career and technical education and the Perkins Act, but it does mean we should supplement what does exist.

I am suggesting that we, the university agricultural educators, take the leadership in developing the "Food and Environmental Security Education Act of 2006." This act would specifically be for secondary and post-secondary agricultural education. The major provisions of the act would be to:

- Insure an adequate supply of safe food through education and training
- Protect the environment through education and training
- Offer college preparatory training in agriculture at the high school level for future agricultural scientists.

The authority for this act would be lodged in the USDA. As a profession, we have the expertise and skills to write such a piece of federal legislation.

Our leadership is needed in the educational reform movement. Our early leaders like Rufus Stimson, H. M. Hamlin, Caycee Scarborough, W. F. Stewart and others were active in the education reform movement. They were involved with the general education community. They wrote in the general education journals. They made sure that agricultural education was at the table in the educational reform talks. As a field, we do have a lot to offer in the area of educational innovation and reform. However, today we are not even in the pickup truck of educational reform. We are sitting at the side of the road. Groups like the Southern Region Education Board are driving the agenda. We must become more proactive in this arena and emphasize that agricultural education is part of the solution. We have to stop just talking to ourselves.

In the area of educational reform, we need to research the value of agricultural education. Does agricultural education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century really make a difference? What is the impact of agricultural education on academic achievement? It is time to stop researching some of the esoteric, Mickey Mouse topics that really don't make a difference and research the important questions. Well designed and properly conducted research doesn't really matter if the problem being studied is insignificant. We may need to focus our research more on the classroom and student outcomes.

Perhaps we should establish an AAAE Speakers Bureau and distribute this list widely outside of agricultural education. Why couldn't we speak at state career and technical education conferences, school administrator meetings, science teacher conferences, etc.? We could help mold the education reform agenda.

### Summary

There is an old axiom "Nature abhors a vacuum." This idiom is used to express the idea that empty or unfilled spaces are unnatural as they go against the laws of nature and physics. There has been a leadership vacuum in agricultural education.

We, the university agricultural educators, must step up and fill the leadership vacuum in agricultural education—individually and

as an organization. It is time to get behind the wheel.

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