

Person-by-Person, Day-by-Day: The Legacies We Pay Forward

2023 Distinguished Lecture, American Association for Agricultural Education
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Greetings

Good afternoon, AAAE, family, mentors, colleagues, and friends.

I begin by paying respect to the indigenous peoples who were the first to occupy this land. My reverence is owed to these brothers and sisters.

Dr. Jonathan Velez: I'll forever recall your October text message. "Susie – bit of a random text but wondering if you might have 5 minutes to give me some thoughts on a research question...Just wanted your take on something. Hope you and Pat are doing well". I responded...*not* to a research question...but to an *invitation*, and here we are at the AAAE Distinguished Lecture (aka "mystery speaker"). Jonathan, I'm flooded with memories of our many visits when you were a Ph.D. student, and I'm thankful they have-and-will continue.

Nearly every mystery speaker I've heard has begun by sharing how humbled they have been by the invitation. I will start the same way. Jonathan, I am humbled by the gift you have given me to address the profession through this very prestigious honor. Thank you.

Some of my family members have come to Raleigh to share-in this moment. They aren't strangers to many of you, because you have intertwined since I started teaching 41 years ago. When I was in grad school at Ohio State, four-year-old Melena D'Anne was well-known in the Agricultural Administration Building for her ability to ask grad students questions about their research findings. Third-grader, Monica, when I was at Penn State, made sure new students got to class on time; she knew the campus inside-and-out and was more than willing to tell students how to get to their buildings (or to the Creamery!). And Baby Mary, as she was known by *every* member of the AAAE Western Region, at 5-weeks of age, represented the University of Idaho at the annual regional research conference in Cody, Wyoming. And many of you know Pat, who has been my partner for 40 years in our complimentary professions. In fact, Pat was President of NAADA (National Agricultural Alumni Development Association) the same year I was President of NACTA (North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture). Thank you, all for being the "village" it has taken for us to serve our professions so proudly for so long.

Attending our Annual Conference

Since 1986, I have missed only a small number of annual AAAE conferences: I remember missing for...

the birth of a baby,
that baby graduating from high school,
Pat battling a medical issue, and
serving as President of ACTER.

In other words, it has taken significant life events to prevent me from attending. Why have I come so faithfully? First, annually sharing our research, contributed to my body of knowledge, and gave me current content to profess in our discipline. I needed that. Second, you have continually inspired and informed me through your masterful teaching. I didn't want to miss that. Finally, I've come because we've been another family to one another...holding a family reunion annually that centered around causes for which we are passionately committed. I knew I wanted to be a part of that.

I've also come annually to hear the mystery speaker. Deborah Spielmaker's thoughtful address in 2022, and, historically, the variety of approaches to all our profession's previous distinguished lectures, have been a highlight for me. So, preparing to meet Dr. Velez's request, while simultaneously humbling and onerous, also provided a perfect opportunity to reflect on my 41 years as an educator. Quite frankly, I surprised myself a bit at what was found...

Introducing the Lecture

...So, that's what brings me to the plan for our time together today. I'm going to spend about 40 minutes or less using examples from *my* professional story, to prompt *you* to think about your current journey, and that-which-will-become the legacy we are leaving for others. Let me pause here to preface my remarks by acknowledging the many disciplines, the varied job descriptions, the numerous teaching load variations, and the many ways in which P&T and non-P&T metrics are measured. In many ways, we are each an N of 1 in our unique rolls, so by no means is today about comparisons. Instead, I'm asking *you* to draw from *my* experiences to help us recognize and applaud our unique, individual strengths, and then to ask ourselves, "What can I take away today as my own personal call to action"?

Defining Legacies

Let's begin. I never considered, in the depths of the trenches of the past 41 years, that I was leaving a legacy. Between teaching, conducting research, serving the profession, and performing the tasks that come with career advancement, and promotion and tenure, I wasn't giving a single thought to what comes after. I was fully aware of the legacies of my mentors and the fact that my thoughts and behaviors were being influenced by their mastery, but I had no inkling that I was also, person-by-person, day-by-day, building my *own* legacy.

One dictionary definition of legacy is, "a lasting impact on the world." While some choose to leave their impact on the world through, for example, large contributions of their finances, others of us have the opportunity to make a more modest, yet no less-important impact through our time and our talents.

Many years ago, an associate professor in Ohio State's Department of History often talked about leaving a legacy. Professor Wayne Woodrow Hayes referenced legacy as "the ways in which we are choosing to 'pay it forward'." You may know this professor from his *other* duties on Ohio State's campus as the legendary football coach, Woody Hayes.

Professor Hayes believed we can never *pay back* the people who supported, guided, and nurtured us along our journey. As such, he believed it's our mission to support, guide, and, nurture the

people we encounter day-by-day, thereby creating “more-good-for-others” from the good that was created for us.

Therefore, my over-arching question for the next 40 minutes is this, “What forward-paying influence might *we* be having on others *today*, that is foundational to building our legacy?” We can look into the rearview mirror of our life’s work, as I have done for the past several months, and pause...and wait...until the image is nearly complete before thinking about that which we are leaving behind; it’s natural to do it that way...to consider our place in our profession once we’ve *already* established it. But waiting to reflect backward, as I did, could obscure *your intended direction*, and could impede you from seeing, right now, the power of your influence. So, let’s think about this together.

Five Legacies

My months-long reflection led me to wonder, “Is legacies, *as-a-plural*, more fitting as we think about our potential to influence?” I came up with five possible legacies for us to consider — professional history, mentors and colleagues, research, students, and family. Each of these legacies is distinct, and yet they come together to weave a tapestry of what I hope to leave *behind*... by paying *forward*.

Of my five legacies, my family, is the most important, so I will close with that one.

A Legacy of Professional History in Agricultural Education

We’ll start with the story of my history in agricultural education. I’ve paused when I’ve heard others reference me as “paving the way...for women in agricultural sciences”. I’ve never considered myself a pioneer. However, *I was* one of the very first women in Ohio to teach, what was then called, secondary production agriculture. The reality for me, like most women of my era who are here today, was simply this...I identified as a woman, I was entering a career I loved, and I was just trying to do what my mentors had taught me to do. I truly overlooked the fact that I really was, with the support, guidance, and nurturing of mentors, pioneering a new career pathway for women in the secondary agricultural sciences and beyond.

So, let’s talk briefly about what “paving the way” for women in the agricultural sciences looked like in the 70s, 80s, and 90s. It took a sustained, persistent effort to overcome barriers. Again, at the time, I didn’t see it as overcoming barriers. My reality was simply doing what was necessary to earn my way in a career to which I believed I had been called. I didn’t know high school principals weren’t allowed to ask me how I was going to handle those big boys in ag class, or that I shouldn’t be asked in interviews if I planned to have a family. I didn’t know high school principals weren’t allowed to discourage me from breast feeding because, “how are you going to do that and still teach school?” I also wasn’t expecting and was therefore ill-prepared to handle the always-inuendo-laced ag teacher’s meetings and conferences. ...I didn’t know *then* that overcoming barriers through sustained persistence would become a part of my legacy. But it is...and there’s more.

Being hired as a university assistant professor, in what was then, traditional departments of agricultural education, meant that department chairs were truly taking a chance in hiring women for pre-service teacher preparation programs.

Consequently, I recall that in the very early 90s, in my first assistant professor position, I didn't tell my chair I was pregnant until I was 5 1/2 months into the pregnancy, because I believed I would be risking my job. While I didn't lose my job, no maternity leave policy was ever shared, so 6-pound, 3-ounce Baby Mary was born on Thursday, and the following Wednesday, at 6-days-old, she was with me in my office, tucked into a snuggly pack that was strapped to my chest, while I conducted interviews to hire a new administrative assistant. At 11 days old, tucked into that same snuggly pack, underneath my oversized shop coat, she was on her first student teaching visit, and, as I already shared, she attended her first research conference in Wyoming, at five weeks old.

I was doing what working women in male-dominated professions needed to do. A gap in our vitas would have been deemed woefully unacceptable, so we pushed hard to outwork those around us, to protect ourselves from being judged unworthy of roles in traditionally men's professions. We were the token diverse representative on every college committee, so our service assignments, not by choice, were heavy, but, counted minimally in P&T. Yet, we persisted.

I'm proud of my history as a woman in this profession and I share this history with my closest professional friends: Tracy Hoover (The Pennsylvania State University), Donna Graham (University of Arkansas), Barbara Kirby (North Carolina State University), Jacque Deeds (Mississippi State University), and Billye Foster (University of Arizona). We were among the first women members of AAAE...and, collectively, we were among the very first women from our colleges of agriculture to achieve much, including, but not limited to:

- holding administrative positions in our colleges and provosts' offices,
- writing, delivering, and assessing DEI curriculum in our colleges and in our universities' general education requirements,
- being named as the first woman AAAE Fellow,
- being elected as the first woman AAAE President,
- being selected as the first woman to deliver the AAAE distinguished lecture,
- being the first woman to earn the AAAE distinguished researcher award,
- being the first woman to earn the NACTA journal research recognition,
- and so much more.

We needed each other **professionally** then, and we need each other **personally** today.

Only now do I look into that rearview mirror and see that my professional history in agricultural education was an integral part of creating what would become one of my legacies.

As I summarize this first of five legacies, I encourage each of us to think about the scenarios that have *forced* our sustained persistence. "What unique skill set do you possess, what valuable perspective do you bring to the discussion, and what vision for a better future are you paying forward today as a result of that sustained persistence that now uniquely defines *you*?"

A Legacy of Influence of Mentors and Colleagues

As a second legacy, let's continue by thinking more about our mentors and colleagues. I'm aware of no metric that can adequately measure how critically important colleagues, especially mentors,

are to each of us. It's one of my ambitions to pay tribute to their legacies by paying forward all that they've taught me.

I showed up at Ohio State as a first-generation college student; a rural, Ohio, sheep and dairy farm kid. My parents and I were not college-savvy. But my high school agricultural science teacher (often a pseudo-parent to many rural high school agriculture students) brought me to campus, told me I should be an ag teacher, and that I needed to go to Ohio State. My-oh-my...I didn't know how desperately I needed mentors. I needed people who could see in me what I had not yet seen in myself. And I found them. ...Or, maybe, *they found me*.

My undergraduate academic advisor, from 1978-1982, was the late Dr. J. Robert Warmbrod, a rare, *two-time* recipient of Ohio State's esteemed Distinguished Professor Award. As a naive 18-year-old, I had no clue who Dr. Warmbrod was...not to the department, to the university, to the profession, or to agricultural education globally. But, let me back up. I had no clue what an academic advisor was! I just knew I had to go to some office to get a signature on my proposed fall class schedule. I can't imagine, upon rearview mirror reflection, how quickly I could've been eaten-alive by the enterprise we know as The Ohio State University without Dr. Warmbrod. His calm, quiet, demeanor; his knowledge of agricultural education and the undergraduate curriculum; his patience; and his steady, steady support, guidance, and nurturing of this rough-around-the-edges rural farm girl, provided my first, and *lasting* impression, of what college academic advising should be. More importantly, though, he became a life-long influence. I hope I adequately paid forward his legacy to my undergraduate academic advisees, and I hope you are doing the same for yours.

My Ph.D. advisor, who also advised my undergraduate student organization, The Agricultural Education Society, was Dr. L. H. Newcomb. Again, I knew nothing of the professional magnitude of the man who was about to change my life (and still does to this day). By being an extraordinary teacher, he taught me how to teach. By being a meticulous researcher, he taught me how to advise the research process. And by living an ethically principled life, he modeled critically sound decision-making that I strive to emulate for my lifetime. His legacy, I hope I pay forward to my graduate student advisees.

Under the influence of these giants in our profession, quietly, without me noticing, the cornerstones of my legacies were being formed day-by-day. I owe the opportunity to teach to these professors and others who mentored-by-example and then gave me freedom.

In academia, I've had the privilege to be supported, guided, and nurtured by 14 incredible department chairs including very capable long-term interim chairs. Consequently, frequently, I hear myself saying something or I see myself doing something that is absolutely their power of influence living through me...I smile in that rearview mirror knowing I am paying forward their influence.

“Who are the cherished colleagues and mentors reflected in your rearview mirror? Are we paying forward their legacies by reflecting them through us day-by-day?”

A Legacy of Research Contributions

The third of our legacies is our contribution to the body of knowledge. I realize that members of AAAE all contribute to the body of knowledge in extremely different and all meaningful ways, so, again, the legacy I'm sharing is embedded in the philosophies of the institutions where I was privileged to work; this can be very different for each of us.

I was taught that a Ph.D. is a research degree earned by, at that time, less than 1% of the population of the country. Given this very stringent threshold, the necessary skill development, and the mentoring provided by my alma mater, was intentional, systematic, and masterful. Consequently, it was a well-designed, well-taught series of research methodologies courses, and impeccable advising, that drilled into me the importance of the research process from both a consumer and a conductor of research perspectives. I, therefore, embraced the research mission of the land grant institutions where I worked.

However, since joining university administration six years ago, my research focus has shifted, so I hadn't reflected wholistically on a career-long research contribution for several years. But in the middle of March, Dr. Caryn Filson invited me to join her Research Theories class to informally visit with our graduate students about a long-term Cognition Research Initiative. It was the thoughtful inquiries of our graduate students that prompted my reflection on a 25-year body of work; a body of work that still informs the literature today.

The "Cognitive Levels of Teaching and Learning" line of inquiry grew from a grant acquired by Dr. L. H. Newcomb. Ultimately, the theoretical and conceptual frames for the inquiry informed the research of undergraduate, MS, and Ph.D. students in Idaho, Pennsylvania, Ohio, India, and Kenya. An eventual pre-post experimental design provided a catalyst for heightened awareness of the results of the research. Among many unique characteristics of the contribution to knowledge was the study's influence on improved college teaching. Nearly 150 professors, from all disciplines in the colleges of agriculture, per our data, as well as their own testimonies, enhanced their teaching impacts. They credited the immersive nature of the in-depth studies of their own planning, delivery, and assessment of teaching as influencers. A milestone contribution of the research was a first of its kind design to examine students' metacognitive 'thinking about their own thinking'. The 25-year body of work prompted numerous invitations for college-wide faculty professional development events across the country and globally at private and public institutions. The body of work was awarded author of the year more than once by more than one journal. It is a core source of pride to leave behind this legacy in agricultural education research. The "Cognitive Levels of Teaching and Learning" studies continue to pay forward not just through reviews of literature, but through the power of scientific inquiry in explaining the phenomenon of good teaching.

In summary of this research legacy: To AAAE Members...Our science is critically needed, valuable, and important. In a world where anyone's opinions can be easily, instantly, globally shared, agricultural educators, communicators, and leaders who believe in and who are intentionally, systematically, and masterfully grounded in scientific research-based decision-making, are needed today more than ever.

So, I ask us, "What critically needed investigations and acts of service are we providing that are contributing to making our living, learning, and working environments a better place for us and for those around us?"

A Legacy of Student Relationships

My fourth of five legacies, as with all of us in this room, is our students' impact on the world.

In autumn of the early 1990s, students from my first Methods of Teaching class started teaching in secondary schools. Many in this room, can relate to teaching a Methods of Teaching class to pre-service teachers, one term per year, for 30 or more years. So, I'm curious...open your calculator on your phones. If we loosely estimate that just 10 students from each of those 30 years became career-long (taught 30 years) secondary teachers (that's $10 \times 30 = 300$), and if those 300 career-long teachers each taught four classes per school day (that's $300 \times 4 = 1200$), with 15 students in each class (that's $1200 \times 15 = 18,000$)...By the time our last pre-service student retires from 30 years of teaching (that's $18,000 \times 30$)...It's how many secondary students have been taught by our pre-service students? Yes, an unbelievable 540,000 secondary students have potentially been taught from just *one* career-long pre-service teacher educator. That's a powerful mathematical definition of impact.

For my story, that mathematical definition of impact possibly interprets in this way...just over half a million secondary students from Idaho, Washington, Oregon, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and more, have hopefully heard their high school agricultural science teacher ask them, "Is this the best you can do with the talent you've been given?" Why? Because my pre-service teacher educator, L. H. Newcomb, asked me that question when I sat at his desk getting help with my unit of instruction. So, I paid forward his legacy by asking the same question to students sitting at my desk getting help with their unit of instruction. I hope my teachers everywhere are asking their students, "Is this the best you can do with the talent you've been given?"

Well-beyond U.S. secondary classrooms, AAEE members' students are teaching globally in community colleges, universities, and in nonformal learning environments. Our students are change agents in communities: they are school board members, business owners, family farm managers, preachers, administrators, coaches, parents, and so much more. Collectively, our students are making an astounding impact on generations of citizens in the U.S. and globally.

I've had the privilege of shepherding $9\frac{3}{4}$ (one just completed candidacy) students, through their Ph.Ds. at Ohio State. They each make this world a better and more informed place person-by-person, day-by-day. Neil, John, Daniel, Caryn, Jeremy, Carla, Sharmin, Siti, Aaron, and Tim: It is through *you* that a legacy in scientific inquiry comes to life.

One of my favorite "scientific inquiry comes to life" moments, happened during breakfast with a Ph.D. student's family, on a weekend morning, because I had written a comment on his draft dissertation that asked, "What is this number telling us?" He lost sleep over trying to figure out what that number was telling us...re-crunching the data all night. It was at *that* restaurant, *that* weekend morning, that he gave scholarly-birth to his dissertation when the answer became crystal clear. It was truly a moment of seeing more of his genius. Funny, he remembers his toddler spilling her glass on me, which I don't remember at all!

I love student moments like sitting with another Ph.D. student at her kitchen table, eating early-morning Pink Moon cupcakes with far-too-many calories, drowning them with way-too-much

coffee, with her newborn and toddler, her two fur babies and my newly-rescued fur baby. We were cranking on a journal article to hit our much-too-aggressive, self-inflicted deadline, and teaching each other lessons about work-life balance...which seemed to have been *very absent* from our lives at that moment.

I remember saying to another Ph.D. student, “I got you a degree, a job and a wife; what more do you want from me?”

Like many of you, my students and I have presented hundreds of workshops and papers, we’ve published award-winning journal articles and together we’ve garnered millions of dollars to study teaching and learning. What I hope to pay forward, though, isn’t *those* tangibles; it’s the legacy of our relationships and paying forward through our students.

Across 41 years, my guiding teaching philosophy, and adopted principles of teaching, led me and many of you to believe in student-centered teaching. The mission, therefore, has been to touch the hearts, not just the minds of our students. So, as I wrap-up this fourth legacy, I’m sharing with you some golden nuggets of a personal teaching philosophy that developed across time:

I hope my Methods of Teaching class students remember me for:

- sitting side-by-side to walk line-by-line through their unit of instruction assignment. For me, that personal immersion in the content was the best way to reach their heart, not just their head. I wanted them to catch my vision for where this unit could take *their* learners.
- I hope they remember having my cell number and being told to “call me when you get stuck” on an assignment. For me, walking with them through the “why” of the assignment, at the moment when they needed it most, opened their hearts, not just their heads to the assignment’s deeper meaning.
- And finally, I hope they remember me for asking them, “Is this clean, legal, moral, and ethical?”

I hope my Cultural Proficiency class students remember me for:

- requiring them to hand-write their journal entries. For me, I liked the emotional connection with holding their handwriting in my hand, and I hoped they felt the same connection when I hand-wrote my comments back to them.
- I hope they remember being empowered to think differently, uniquely, and positively about the many cultures that surround us. For me, I wanted them to see into the hearts, not just the heads of all who are present in their living, learning, and working environments.

As I summarize this legacy, it’s my hope that every student I’ve hugged, either physically or helplessly-from-a-distance, has permanently etched into their hearts and minds that I cared *about* them, and *for* them as the unique, one-of-a-kind souls they truly are. I hope they *felt* my belief that every student who walked through the door deserved the best I had to offer.

One of my previous Assistant Deans said to me, “You can’t want it more than they do.” I’ve learned that I don’t always agree with that. Often, we *have to* want it more than them. Without our vision, they may never grasp the full power of the possibilities awaiting them. As I shared with

you earlier...sometimes, a rural Ohio farm girl needs a mentor who sees her potential before she does, and opens a door.

As we move through our careers, we're the stewards of the words and actions that inspired and motivated us. And so, I ask us, "What words are we choosing to echo? Would we be proud of how we are being remembered person-by-person, day-by-day?"

The Legacy of Family

Finally, I told you I would wrap-up by talking about my most important legacy; our family units are often our true legacy. Pat and I leave a legacy of raising three beautiful daughters who are independent, self-assured women, and who have partners that together make each other better. I've shared with you only a glimpse of their *forced* total immersion into Pat and I's professional lives. I'm grateful for their tolerance of that immersion and for their patience as we maneuvered through 40 plus years of complexities. Thank you. All of this is worth it because of you.

Conclusion

In closing, I hope my story inspires you to *pre*-reflect on your career...to envision the legacies you want to leave, and to take-action in paying forward the legacies of those who are supporting, guiding, and nurturing you.

As the African Proverb says, "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." I'm proud of our profession, and how far we have come together. And it is together that we must continue to learn and mindfully grow. The differences that we make globally, we make together. Person-by-person, day-by-day. The legacies we pay forward will continue to powerfully impact generations of educators, communicators, leaders, and agriculturalists.

Thank you for your mentorship and friendship.

Acknowledgements

Thank you for your assistance in creating, drafting, reading, and editing this manuscript in preparation for the 2023 AAAE Distinguished Lecture:

Melena Dillingham, County Extension Administrative Assistant, North Carolina State University
David Isaacs, Communications and Media Relations Manager, Office of Student Life, The Ohio State University

L. H. Newcomb, Senior Associate Dean Emeritus, College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences, The Ohio State University