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**Innovative
Professional Development**

Opening Doors to Possibilities You Didn't Anticipate

by Dr. Laura Hasselquist

When I finished my master's degree in 2010, someone asked when I planned to start a doctorate. I laughed and said "never"—I felt I had reached my limit with higher education. That conviction lasted only three or four years. What changed? My role and involvement in professional development.

During my undergraduate program, my faculty consistently emphasized the importance of professional development and the support network that comes with it. While student teaching, I saw firsthand how agriculture teachers built professional knowledge, skills, and relationships. Sometimes it happened informally—an evening meeting for the county Ag teachers with a guest speaker on greenhouse management. Other times it was a structured FFA district in-service that combined state updates, idea sharing, and industry tours. But the event Wisconsin agriculture teachers looked forward to most was Summer Conference.

This four-day conference—full of teacher-led workshops, business meetings, industry tours, and guest speakers—provided the spark I needed to gear up for

another school year. It struck the perfect balance between social connection and professional learning. It was also where I first encountered the National Agriculture Teacher Ambassador Academy (NATAA), a professional development experience facilitated by NAAE.

I first learned about NATAA through workshops led by past participants. The academy uses a train-the-trainer model, and its graduates are expected to deliver workshops. Over time, many Wisconsin teachers I admired and respected completed NATAA and shared their expertise at the state conference. Through their sessions, I learned the basics of inquiry-based instruction and gathered engaging classroom labs and activities. Because those experiences were so valuable, I took a chance and applied for the Academy. I had no idea how much it would shape the trajectory of my career.

That summer, I spent a week immersed in the most intense and uplifting professional development I had ever experienced. I left feeling energized—not only about improving instruction for my students, but also about sharing what I had learned with other educators. After facilitating my

first NATAA-inspired workshops, I realized how much I enjoyed supporting teachers. Soon I was presenting at conferences at the local, state, and national levels. Through those opportunities, I discovered a deep passion for helping teachers become better.

With some encouragement (and a push from friends long before I felt ready), I applied to a doctoral program—and never looked back. I am fortunate to have built a career where I wake up each day focused on improving education for preservice teachers and supporting in-service teachers in enhancing their practice and confidence.

This issue highlights some of the most innovative professional development ideas from across the country. Professional development truly opens new doors. The articles emphasize not just building knowledge and skills but also creating and sustaining professional networks. I encourage you to engage in professional development at the local, state, and national levels—and, when you can, to share what you know. Whether it's a new insight, a new connection, or even a new career path, professional development can open countless doors. You just have to walk through them.



*Editor of **The Agricultural Education Magazine** and Associate Professor at South Dakota State University, Laura Hasselquist champions innovative professional development. She's built a career on opening doors for agriculture teachers—and occasionally pushing them open when needed.*



Innovative Professional Development

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Article Submission

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The Call of the Wild: Innovation and Inspiration Behind Professional Growth in Agricultural Education

by Dr. Ashley Rogers

In nature, the word “innovative” isn’t bolded on a strategic plan or outlined as a goal for the next year, it’s a matter of survival. Leafcutter ants, for example, have adapted over generations by cutting leaves, carrying them underground, and cultivating a specialized fungus that becomes their food source. Each new season refines the system, ensuring the future of their colony thrives. They adjust to weather patterns, pests, predators, and every environmental shift they encounter. These tiny farmers know the stakes: if they stop learning, they stop thriving.

We can observe the art of innovation across other species. Octopuses unscrew jars, learn to open latches, all to access food more efficiently. Crows drop nuts onto busy highways so passing cars will crack shells for them. Tigers alter their hunting strategies based on landscape, prey, and

other environmental factors. Each species innovating a new technique to ensure survival.

Agricultural educators aren’t so different.

Each school year looks quite different from the last. New standards, emerging industry needs, evolving student interests, and teacher retention all require an agriculture teacher to adapt to ensure a successful school year and continuation of their agriculture programs. To continue to nourish the spirit of the profession, professional development is critical. It’s how we learn, grow, process, and refine our skills to meet the ever changing landscape of agricultural education.

Organizations, state staff, agricultural educators, and industry partners pay attention to what’s working, where their gaps exist, and predicting what the profession may need next. The same

way a tiger shifts its strategy or a crow refines its tools, agricultural education continues to innovate to build a profession that both survives and thrives.

Innovation, after all, is a form of adaptation, sometimes it is intentional and other times it occurs organically. Some of the most impactful professional development came to be as conversations were held in rocking chairs on a porch at FFA camp, a brainstorming session on a zoom call, or scrolling through social media. There are also many groups that look at data driven research and intentionally create innovative professional development to meet teachers where they are. Intentional or unintentional, the drive to create professional development to lift agriculture teachers is present and thriving.

As the theme editor for this edition of *The Ag Ed Magazine*, every article that crossed my desk was a testament to the power of innovation, collaboration, and the heart that defines an agriculture teacher. Across the profession there are endless opportunities to grow technical and pedagogical skills, gain knowledge in various content areas, broaden networks, and continue to fill both our



NAAE trained facilitators deliver high quality professional development programs to states, regions, and on the national level. Facilitators engage, mentor, and cultivate networks to inspire innovation and collaboration across the profession.

teacher toolboxes and personal buckets with resources that will serve our programs and ourselves for years to come.

As a Program Manager for Professional Development and Teacher Recruitment & Retention with the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE), I have had the distinct honor of helping to develop national programs and meeting with states to hear of their state specific professional development programs through the State Teach Ag Results (STAR) program powered by the CHS Foundation. Through these initiatives, innovative professional development continues to surface again and again.

Just as the natural world adapts with purpose, agricultural education thrives when its systems evolve to meet the needs of teachers and students. NAAE has embraced this responsibility with intention, developing strategic, innovative programs designed to meet teachers exactly where they are in their professional journey. The organization has upheld its goal of supporting teachers at every age and every stage through its three-pronged mission of professional development, agricultural advocacy, and recruitment, retention, and recognition of agricultural educators.

For preservice teachers, NAAE's Future Agriscience Teacher (FAST) program provides a foundation of skill-building, networking, and confidence. This program is designed to help emerging educators enter the profession with strong

The relationships formed within innovative professional development programs are essential to the development of teachers. A community of belonging creates an environment that encourages participation in the innovative professional development opportunity.

inquiry-based practices and a network they can lean on. FAST is also supported by CHS Foundation Inc., BASF, Corteva, and Growth Energy.

For early career teachers, the Teachers Turn the Key program is the longest standing professional development program offered by the organization. This program offers structure, support, and practical strategies to navigate what can be overwhelming first years. It's a program centered in the realities new teachers face, pairing them with guidance, community, and tools that help them adapt and thrive. As the need for this program became clear, NAAE developed a subset of the program titled Early Career Elements that states and regions can offer to early career teachers.

Mid-career educators can turn to XLR8, a leadership and professional growth experience tailored for teachers ready to expand their influence, enhance

their instructional toolkit, and re-energize their purpose within the profession. XLR8 is sponsored by Lincoln Electric.

More experienced agriculture teachers can participate in NAAE's newest national program titled INFLUENCE. This year-long, advanced leadership experience explores the profound impact agriculture teachers can have in their communities and across the industry. It begins in Washington, D.C. at the National Policy Seminar, where educators engage in policy, advocacy, and national-level engagement, and concludes at the annual NAAE Convention. This program is for the teacher who wants to shape not only the next generation of students, but the future of agricultural education itself by continuing to build a legacy in their communities.

NAAE also offers inquiry-based learning opportunities that states can bring directly to their agricultural educators

Agricultural education continues to innovate to build a profession that both survives and thrives





Hands-on professional development lets agriculture teachers experience lessons from both sides, helping them tailor activities to fit their students and their classroom needs.

“
Stay curious.
Stay
connected.
Stay willing to
change.”

through Agriscience Inquiry Institutes (Ag I²). At the national level, teachers seeking a deeper dive can participate in the National Agriscience Ambassador Academy (NATAA), a transformative weeklong experience that elevates inquiry instruction and empowers educators to teach other teachers in their home states. NATAA is sponsored by Corteva.

Recognizing that innovation is not sustainable without wellness, NAAE has also prioritized teacher resiliency. Through multiple one-hour workshops and a three-hour reflective experience, NAAE equips teachers with tools to manage stress, strengthen emotional health, and bring their best selves not only to their classrooms, but home to their families and communities.

The annual NAAE Convention remains the most comprehensive professional development experience available to agriculture teachers. This convention offers more sessions, more hands-on learning, and more community-building than any other event in the profession. For those seeking flexible, year-round engagement, NAAE also provides virtual opportunities such as the popular NAAE Virtual Book Club.

High-quality professional development isn't just a service NAAE provides, it's a strategic pillar and a commitment to cultivating a thriving and resilient profession. Like the ecosystems we observe in nature, agricultural education grows stronger when its members have access to the right tools, the right learning, and the right support at the right time. Through these programs, NAAE continues to innovate, adapt, and encourage agriculture teachers across the nation.

As part of the three-pronged mission of NAAE, its efforts of professional development and teacher recruitment, retention, and recognition go hand in hand. As many animals of various ecosystems work in symbiosis, NAAE pillars often complement one another to ensure a strong and thriving profession. Through the efforts of the STAR program, states implement strategies to recruit, retain, and recognize highly qualified and diverse agriculture teachers.

Funding support of the STAR program and other state entities, many states offer innovative professional development opportunities tailored to the needs of the profession. For example, Virginia offers a “Make It, Take It” workshop series, where

teachers engage in a lesson making an item that they can take back to their classrooms to send students home with those same skills. North Carolina offers a summer professional development series that any teacher, anywhere can join. New York offers professional development scholarships that teachers can utilize to participate in a professional development of choice.

As each state offers new and exciting professional development opportunities at their state conferences, it's worth the time to reach out to various state leaders and agriculture teachers to inquire about the meaningful and inspiring professional development programs. If your state is a STAR state, there is also access to a document with innovative and unique professional development opportunities.

Growing up, I found myself glued to the Highlights Animal Books on whales, eagles, and tigers, watching Steve Irwin in The Crocodile Hunter series, or tuning into Zoboomafoo, never realizing the profound impact of those early glimpses of innovation and adaptation would shape the way I view the world today. Nature shows us that survival is most impacted by attention, intention, and gathering data from the

Resiliency focused professional development can be just as hands on as inquiry. Innovating professional development to be both engaging and reflective are equally as important.

world around us. Nature is brave in the way it stays curious, embraces vulnerability, and does not shy away from change.

Our profession grows because agriculture teachers grow. It evolves as agriculture teachers and industry leaders remain curious about improvements and are courageous enough to change with emerging needs. Innovation in agricultural education is not accidental. It's carefully crafted through collaboration, curiosity, and courage.

As we continue moving the needle forward in the profession, the message is simple: to continue to keep a thriving ecosystem, we must adhere to the call of the wild, take the leap, act on the idea, and try something new. Stay curious. Stay connected. Stay willing to change.



Ashley Rogers is a NAAE Program Manager of Professional Development and Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Empowering Teacher Connections through Global Agriculture Professional Development Programs

by the Global Teach Ag Network:

Thomas Gabel, Abigail O'Neil, Dr. Melanie Miller Foster, & Dr. Daniel Foster

Professional development can take many different forms and meet many different needs. Sometimes the focus is on a specific topic – such as welding, classroom management, FFA competitions, or seemingly anything else that intersects with the lives of an agricultural educator. Our team has spent a considerable amount of time reflecting on what truly makes professional development meaningful and long-lasting and has found what we believe is our core principle.

Teachers Matter.

It sounds cliché, and sounds like a given, but what we mean by this is that teachers are truly the most critical part of the professional development process or program. Professional development exists solely to equip teachers to do the job set before them

of inspiring minds and investing in the lives of youth. When our team reminds ourselves of this, we find ourselves frequently asking – are we designing our programs where the teacher's voice is not only valued, but also prominent? Are teachers able to make decisions on what they find to be valuable, explore the concepts they need to grow in, and are they positioned to advocate for what would be most helpful to them as professionals? Thus, we design our programs specifically with this in mind – Teachers Matter.

This article aims to highlight a few of our global agriculture professional development programs. We hope that you will see how we position educator voices at the forefront of these opportunities and seek to have educators guide their own professional learning and journeys.

Exploring Global: Through Immersion Experiences

One of the most effective ways to grow alongside a group of people is to collaborate on a shared purpose or project. As we design our international immersion experiences, this is a significant focal point of what we hope to achieve. We do not just want to go somewhere; we want to immerse ourselves in the culture of that community, connect with individuals, build relationships, and hopefully leave that community better than we found it because of our shared connection.

Our most recent example of an international immersion experience hosted by our team is the 2025 Teach Ag Uganda experience, where we partnered with the non-governmental organization, Field of Hope, to engage directly in schools with agricul-

(LEFT) Morgan Vincent, an agriscience educator and doctoral candidate in Chemistry at Penn State, leads a lesson for a Uganda Class.

(RIGHT) Todd Eick, an agriscience teacher in New York, leads a professional development session for U.S. and Ugandan educators during the Teach Ag Uganda experience.



tural education and pedagogical professional development. This experience connected 12 U.S. agricultural educators with Ugandan agriculture teachers at four different Ugandan schools. Over the course of a month, U.S. and Ugandan teachers collaborated to design project-based learning in food security that would be supervised and implemented by students in the school for years to come.

Todd Eick, an agriscience teacher at Niagara Career and Technical Education Center in New York participated in the 2025 Teach Ag Uganda program. When reflecting on his experience, he shared “It is without a doubt the best professional development and experience I have ever had”. He continued by sharing “This global experience had to be one of the most impactful things that ever happened to me on a personal level, spiritually and educationally”. This program has inspired Todd’s teaching through the implementation of World Wide Wednesdays, where his students share their global experiences and aspirations. Additionally, he connects his classroom directly with a Ugandan student teacher and their mushroom project. This is just one example of the outcomes we hope to see from these professional development programs!

We have led previous programs in Uganda, Malaysia, Korea, Belize, and Nepal. Our team

is actively seeking future opportunities as we would love to host experiences like this in the future with more agricultural educators!

While we do not always have funding to make experiences like this a reality, we are super thankful for one of our global learning partners making a way for agriculture teachers to explore international opportunities like this on an annual basis. The National FFA Organization coordinates the Lyle Orwig International Travel Grant for Agriculture Educators. This annual scholarship program provides agriculture teachers with an opportunity to apply for up to \$6,000 of funding for an international immersion experience.

There are plenty of additional opportunities to explore – we would love for you to apply to join us whenever our next funded opportunity arises. Even if you are unable to do so, we hope you will work alongside partners (like NAAE and their Greece Agriculture & Culture Tour) to make it a reality. Additionally, our coaching would be to reach out to your local universities to see if they can support you. We have had instances of multiple teachers being supported financially by an institution or receiving graduate credit for their international immersion experience. If you’d like to discuss what this would entail, please don’t hesitate to contact our team.

Exploring Global: Through Local Connections

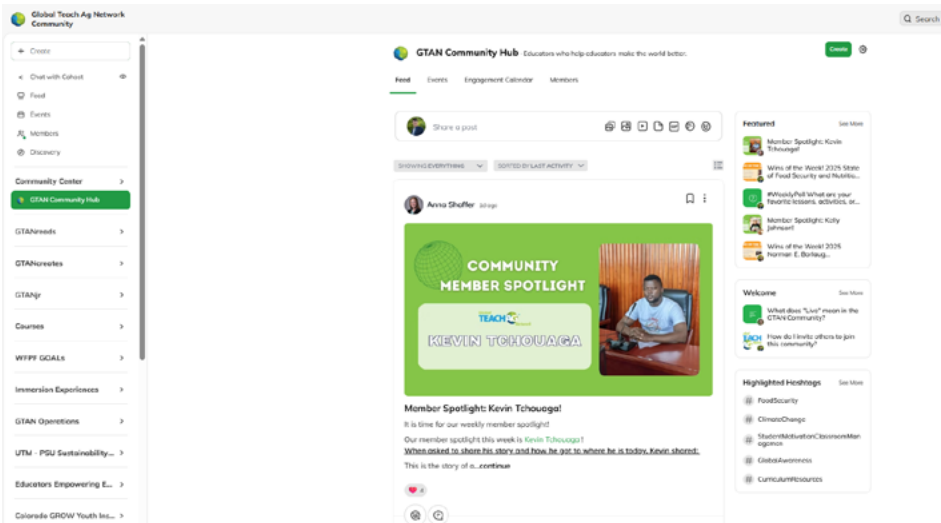
It is a large commitment, both financially and logistically, to commit a whole month to travel to a different country. While we believe it is certainly worth that sacrifice, it is most of the time impossible for agriculture teachers to find the time in our busy schedules to make something like that happen. With this in mind, our team has also created professional development programs hosted within the U.S., where we focus on how we can connect our local agricultural contexts to global opportunities. One of these programs is our Educators Empowering Educators (E3) program, which was launched in 2024 with our first cohort of 12 teachers.

This program’s primary goal is to shorten the feedback loop between agricultural educators and agricultural researchers. There is cutting-edge agricultural research being done across the world, yet it begs the question, how are these new developments reaching students in our classrooms, and how do teachers receive professional development to be confident to teach these new topics? To accomplish this, our E3 program forms three teacher teams of four and partners them with a team of agricultural researchers to explore new agricultural topics. In year one, our teams explored pollinator pathways (including



“One of the most effective ways to grow alongside a group of people is to collaborate on a shared purpose or project.”

Teachers in the Educators Empowering Educators (E3) program completing a planning session alongside their agricultural research collaborators.



A screenshot of the main community feed within the GTAN Community. The Community is free to join for any educator!

the use of artificial intelligence), biofortified microgreens and their use in addressing micronutrient deficiencies, and fermented foods and their implications on human health and food science. Each team was tasked with translating that research into professional development opportunities for educators, including digital courses and professional development sessions through the Global Ag Literacy Summit hosted within the GTAN Community.

We are thrilled about what Cohort 1 has accomplished and how they have demonstrated local and global connections in these areas. Our second cohort is preparing to meet with their scientist teams in January and explore topics in beef production, biochar, and food waste. They will be responsible for leading the 2026 virtual Global Ag Literacy Summit in June, which will be hosted in the GTAN Community. If you wish to be part of this program specifically, applications will open for Cohort 3 in late spring/early summer 2026.

Exploring Global: Through Community Connections

Have you ever met someone at a conference and felt an instant connection, not just as

professionals, but as people? Our digital community aims to be a place where people can connect beyond a single conference encounter. This community hosts more than 2,000 educators from over 60 countries. While we create structure in the community through a monthly. We have a few key times in the community where we conduct more intensive programming, including our **annual Community Catalyzing Week (February 9-13)** and the **Global Ag Literacy Summit (June 16-18)**, much of the programming year is designed to be flexible to allow educators to engage as they are able.

A few opportunities in particular that are provided include:

- Courses – focused on global agricultural concepts (designed to be completed in 45-60 minutes)
- Complementary programs – ranging from global agriculture modules you can use with your students, art connections to agriculture, an educator book club, and more
- Partnerships – our team will post updates, including events, from our partners. With examples being the FAO’s e-learning academy

Any educator can join the GTAN Community through this QR code or this URL - <https://global-teach-ag-network.mn.co/>. The GTAN team would love to have you join the community!



Ultimately, this community thrives only because of its members. We hope you will join this space and share and connect as time allows. <https://global-teach-ag-network.mn.co/>

Where do we go from here?

If any of these opportunities interest you, we invite you to explore our website (<https://globalteachagnetwork.psu.edu/>) and join the GTAN Community. We will always post updates on our programs in the community space. Additionally, we invite you to do the following:

- Join the GTAN Community – <https://global-teach-ag-network.mn.co/>
- Connect with an educator from the U.S. on a global topic
- Connect with an educator from a different country
- Sign up for one of our courses (like those made from our E3 Cohort 1 educator teams)
- Sign-up to be notified when Educators Empowering Edu-

cators (E3) Cohort 3 Applications open – <https://globalteachnetwork.psu.edu/educators-empowering-educators/>

- Save the date for the 2026 Catalyzing Week (February 9-13) and 2026 Global Ag Literacy Summit (June 16-18)

If you take nothing else away from this article, we want you to know that you are valued and have a unique opportunity to change the world. If we can help in any way, please don't hesitate

to reach out to our team. We hope you will join us for an adventure on one of our programs in the future!



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Beyond Borders: PD through Agriculturally Focused Global Engagement

by Dr. Tyson Sorenson, Kassidy Allred, & Dr. Thomas Henderson

Imagine professional development (PD) that does not involve sitting under fluorescent lights, watching yet another PowerPoint presentation, and counting down the hours until lunch. Instead, envision earning professional development hours while enjoying breakfast in a rainforest, touring agricultural operations unlike anything found at home, and ending the day kayaking through a bioluminescent bay. Though it may sound like a scene from a travel magazine, these experiences are a reality for agriculture teachers participating in agriculturally focused global engagement programs.

The Concept

There is a growing need for teacher professional development experiences that are not only relevant and rigorous but also energizing and transformative (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Effective PD should reignite pas-

sion for teaching, foster a sense of purpose, and provide meaningful engagement with both content and community (Fairman et al., 2020). It must go beyond compliance-based models and instead offer opportunities that challenge educators intellectually, connect them with peers, and expand their global perspectives (Desimone & Garet, 2015).

To counter this, burnout among agricultural educators, especially those in mid- to late-career stages, is a persistent and deeply concerning issue, with many reporting significant emotional exhaustion (Croom, 2003; Norris, 2025). Traditional professional development offerings often fall short of addressing this challenge, leaving many agricultural educators with limited options for renewal, growth, or upward mobility within their discipline.

This vision led to the development of a new kind of PD,

one designed to be impactful, immersive, and inspiring. This global experience was created to connect teachers nationwide and abroad, engaging them in rich cultural exchange and exploration of agricultural systems. At its core, this initiative has sought to reframe PD as a catalyst for professional rejuvenation and long-term career fulfillment.

Programs and Partnerships

To facilitate a meaningful, impactful, and rejuvenating professional development experience, agriculture teacher educators from various universities partnered with Experience International, a non-profit educational organization focused on global educational opportunities. The goal of the partnership and the program was to integrate cultural immersion with technical and pedagogical content enrichment, offering agricultural educators transformative learning

(RIGHT) Harvesting coconuts straight from the source — a reminder that some lessons are best learned by getting a little adventurous.

(LEFT) Participants explore a flower farm nestled in the lush Puerto Rican countryside during the Global Agriculture Experience.



opportunities beyond traditional PD formats.

In 2024, the program was launched, which brought agriculture teachers, primarily from California and Utah to Puerto Rico. Since then, the program has included teachers from other states. Chosen for its accessibility (no need for a passport), rich agricultural and tropical landscapes and heritage, history and culture, agricultural education and land-grant university connection, and relationship with the United States, Puerto Rico has been a perfect destination for globally focused agriculture teacher PD. Agriculture teacher participants immerse themselves in agricultural production (e.g., mango harvesting, cacao processing, coffee testing, pineapple cultivation), agricultural education (school visits), and engaging with professionals about relevant topics (e.g., funding resources, education, global food issues, natural resources management, resilience and innovation). Professional development is co-facilitated by Puerto Rican agricultural educators, farmers, and professionals, fostering authentic peer-to-peer exchange and collaborative learning. Cultural engagement

through food, music, and dialogue fostered human connection, making the experience both successful and deeply revitalizing.

Why Ag-Focused Global Engagement Works: Voices from Participants

We have collected data from the past few years from participants engaging in these global experiences. We have interviewed the participants one to two years after their experience to determine the impact it has had on their teaching practices. Participants shared how this experience was life-changing and very impactful to them professionally and personally. One participant stated, "It wasn't just professional development; it was personal development too." Because of the immersive nature of this PD, participants shared how much valuable learning occurred. One participant shared, "You leave feeling like you've lived something, not just attended something." Another said, "It wasn't just a trip, it was an experience. You were learning every single day, even when you didn't realize it." Another participant shared, "I loved that it was hands-on. You learn by seeing, doing, and feeling. That sticks

with you way more than a PowerPoint ever could."

Our findings suggest that these agriculturally focused global experiences for agriculture teachers were highly impactful in four different ways: 1) reignited their passion for teaching, 2) broadened pedagogical and cultural perspectives, 3) cultivated a sense of community, and 4) fostered a sense of gratitude and appreciation.

Finding the Spark Again: Reigniting a Purpose and Passion for Teaching

Agriculture teacher participants found that this PD experience reignited their passion for teaching. They expressed how the experience provided them with a deep emotional and professional renewal. The participant comments highlight the reasons they became teachers, a new sense of energy and enthusiasm, and a reaffirmation of the importance of agricultural education. The global engagement experience inspired them to recommit to their roles as educators. It was not just professional development; it was professional revitalization. Here are some quotes from the participant interviews:

(RIGHT) Local producers lead a coffee cupping session, sharing the science and art behind Puerto Rico's coffee industry.

(LEFT) Experiencing agricultural innovation firsthand helps teachers bring emerging technologies and real-world applications back to their classrooms.



“We’re just a big family. You spend five minutes with an ag teacher anywhere, and you’re connected. You’re my family, I got your back, you got my back.”

“It was kind of a booster shot in my arm to remind me and re-fortify what I already knew — that people need to be educated concerning agriculture and its impact in our daily lives.”

“I feel like I got my passion back. Like, I didn’t realize how much I needed this until I was here.”

“It reminded me that what I do matters, that agriculture matters, and that my students need me to care about it again.”

“It gave me the motivation to finish strong. I was ready to walk away, but now I’m thinking about what’s next instead.”

“Sometimes you just need to step away to remember why you love what you do. This was that moment for me.”

Broadened Pedagogical and Cultural Perspectives

This experience helped participants gain a new perspective and appreciation for agricultural education in other contexts. Seeing educators and innovative producers be successful with fewer resources inspired the participants. Through this experience, participants shared how it made them reevaluate their own teaching practices, highlighting that impactful education does not require a lot of resources. They also shared how this experience broadened their perspective on agriculture to see it as a globally interconnected system. Here are some quotes from the interviews highlighting this finding:

“If she can do it with really limited supplies, then I can do it.”

“It helped me see that you don’t need all the fancy stuff to have a great program.”

“It changed how I see my classroom. I came home thinking, what can I do differently with what I already have?”

“It made me think globally — like, how what we do here connects to people across the world.”

“It gave me perspective. I was focused on everything that’s hard about teaching, and this made me see the good again.”

Cultivating Community and Connection Among Agricultural Educators

Participants shared their joy in connecting with other agricultural educators through shared challenges and mutual support. The participants talked about a space where they felt supported as a professional community. Here are some quotes from the participants:

“We’re just a big family. You spend five minutes with an ag teacher anywhere, and you’re connected. You’re my family, I got your back, you got my back.”

“Professionally, I love the networking. Meeting people, making those contacts, and being able to compare and glean from each other’s experiences. That was fabulous.”

“It reminded me that no matter where you teach, we all face the same challenges — and we’re stronger together.”



A little teamwork and a lot of learning. Experiences like picking mangoes help agricultural educators connect classroom lessons to the real world.

“That sense of community — that’s something I wish every ag teacher could experience.”

Fostering a Sense of Gratitude and Appreciation

A common sentiment among the participants was how the experience made them more grateful for their own program, students, support, and the opportunity to be agriculture teachers. Here are some quotes featuring this finding:

“It made me realize how lucky I am — for my program, my students, and the support I have.”

“Seeing how others teach with so little made me stop and appreciate what I have back home.”

“It was humbling to see how much passion they had, even

without the resources we take for granted.”

“I left feeling grateful — for the people I met, for the students I teach, and for this profession.”

If we want agricultural education to thrive, we have to think beyond our classrooms—and sometimes, beyond our borders. The Global Agriculture Experience equips teachers with the tools, perspective, and community to keep their fire alive. These agriculturally focused global experiences reignite passion for teaching, broaden perspectives, build professional networks, and renew a commitment to excellence. More than traditional PD, they offer high-impact opportunities that meet both the emotional and professional needs of educators, especially those facing burnout or searching for renewed purpose. As our field

continues to evolve, integrating global experiential learning into PD should be seen not as an extra, but as essential to sustaining teacher engagement, growth, and fulfillment.

If you'd like to learn more about the Puerto Rico PD opportunity or other ways to engage globally, reach out to the authors.

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The Power of We: Partnerships that Build Teachers

by Ray Pienizak, Michelle Vasbinder, & Tori Rosser

As the saying goes, “Everything is Bigger in Texas!” We at the Agricultural Teachers Association of Texas (ATAT) do our part to help prove this statement by providing Professional Development for the over 2,600 teachers who belong to our association. Providing a variety of locations and ways to access timely professional development is essential for our members. Connecting our members with current industry professionals and resources for them to share with their students is also of great value. We look for these opportunities in person, online, and through other forms of media.

An ag teacher’s time is valuable, so one way we provide easily usable resources is through our podcast, Ag Teacher Talk, which can be found on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, iHeartRadio, Podcast Index, and Podcast Addict. Since launching, Ag Teacher Talk has been downloaded over 1,120 times. Our goal is to provide timely talks related to the current happenings and common challenges Ag Science Teachers encounter throughout the year. We have connected our teachers with Texas State Board of Education member Tom Maynard to help teachers better understand the role of the board in Texas,

addressed work-life balance, provided tips on staying healthy, and working with parents.

Our podcast set its roots during the COVID-19 pandemic, when we began hosting weekly Ag Teacher Talks over Zoom to facilitate connections among teachers. Each week from April through May of 2020, a panel of teachers shared the methods they were using to connect with their students and what their districts were asking them to do. These meetings grew into topic-based monthly talks, with topics including Welcome to the Ag Teacher Profession, FFA Roster tips, ESSR Funding, National FFA Ambassadors, and more. These presentations were posted to our association website, and can be found at texasagteachers.org/videos.aspx

Our association has been holding an annual conference for many years, but our members often request training throughout the year to continue to fill their teacher toolbox. Michelle Vasbinder was hired as Professional Development Coordinator in December of 2022 with the goal of connecting with industry professionals and Texas Universities to provide hands-on training through the school year and to develop relevant curriculum. As Texas’ agricultural education is based upon six Programs of Study, we looked at the most popular courses within the programs of study and the Indus-

“Providing a variety of locations and ways to access timely professional development is essential for our members.”



Teachers received specialized training on evaluating electronics used in Tractors from John Deere specialists.

try-Based Certifications available for our students. The two main areas we identified were ag mechanics and floral design.

ATAT first connected with AWS Welding Certification instructor Richard Depue to provide welder certification training workshops across the state to maximize accessibility. These workshops have been well attended, with over 30 attendees in each session, in addition to the over 100 attendees who attend in summer training offered at the ATAT Summer Professional Development Conference.

One of the specialized CDEs in Texas is the Tractor Technician CDE, which is becoming more popular each year. Many teachers have limited knowledge in tractor repair and troubleshooting, so we have partnered with Hlavinka Equipment in East Bernard and Navarro College in Corsicana. Hlavinka reached out in an effort to give Continuing Education Units (CEUs) to teachers, and we jumped at another opportunity to provide training for our teachers.

They host a clinic for both students and teachers to understand the contest by having tractors, parts, and other equipment available for teachers to train their students at the Hlavinka Equipment Facility. Working with Navarro College has provided another hands-on opportunity for teachers to learn more ins and outs of preparing students for careers in tractor repair and the contest side of the event. This partnership with both groups brings them to our summer conference to conduct workshops, including an electrical instruments troubleshooting workshop.

Floral Design is another one of Texas's top five enrolled courses, and with constant innovations in the field, there is a continual

Aaron Heizer gives live training on basic leatherworking skills to teachers at the ATAT conference.

need for professional development. Our association has many talented members, not to mention strong industry partners. One partner is the Texas State Floral Association, who we partner with to host different professional development workshops throughout the year. By utilizing current teachers as well as industry professionals, we are able to bring the most current styles and trends to the classroom.

We also work closely to promote the diverse professional development offered by our universities, especially Texas A&M University. We are able to jointly offer CEUs, and in the past three years we have granted over 6,500 hours to 478 Texas Ag Educators.

Our largest event of the year is our yearly professional development conference held in the third week of July. We host hands-on pre-conference workshops and tours in addition to two days of workshops during

the week. Our teachers and other professionals can submit proposals to host a workshop or a tour. Annually, we receive 150-250 proposals and suggestions.

Pre-conference events are held on Sunday and Monday. A partnership with the Texas State Floral Association (TSFA) offers our teachers a chance to collaborate with master florists from throughout the state and country at full-day workshops and a Sunday evening event. We also team up with the TSFA lead trainers to offer various workshops for Level 1 and Level 2 floral certifications that our students can receive.

Another long-standing partnership we have is with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. They conduct Hunter, Boater, and Angler education certification workshops and bring materials for our teachers to take home to do the training. They do half and full day training to certify our teachers to be able

“Our teachers love to mingle and talk with the exhibits and learn trends and new techniques to use with their students.”





(TOP) Our teachers value the opportunity to connect with curriculum providers during our Annual Conference.

(BOTTOM) ATAT and Texas Farm Bureau offer an early career ag teacher program, which they promoted on their website as well as through our email system and social media.



Early Ag Teacher Professional Development

Join Texas Farm Bureau for a two-day professional development opportunity that immerses teachers in hands-on classroom/laboratory instruction focused on areas addressed in an agricultural science classroom (i.e., instruction, SAEs, and FFA).

The workshop incorporates presentations by agricultural experts who specialize in education. It also includes site visits to area farms and agricultural businesses for a truly hands-on experience. You're sure to walk away with new information and ideas on how to enhance the learning experience in your classroom!

Eligible teachers include those who have been teaching agricultural science for five years or less.

June 2-3
Texas Farm Bureau Conference & Training Center
7410 Fish Pond Rd
Waco



to host hunter and boater education classes locally.

We also collaborate with the Texas Agrilife Extension service to offer a Pesticide Certification and other workshops for them to receive CEUs to maintain their certification. As well as many teacher-led workshops varying in topic, including: livestock trailer backing and maintenance, hydroponics in the classroom, turfgrass management, leatherworking in the classroom with Illume, SAE for all, and a variety of Leadership and Career Development Event trainings.

One of our unique hands-on workshops which has gained popularity is Leatherworking. Teachers across the state have begun using this skill in their classrooms, and a collaboration with Makers Leather Supply was established. Aaron Heizer from the company had so much fun sharing his skills that he came to the Texas FFA convention and recently attended the National Convention to share those skills.

In addition to pre-conference workshops, ATAT also offers a variety of tours in the city or lo-

cal area where we are hosting our conference. This offers an experience to members as well as opening the door to creating connections across industries to elevate their program and classroom. Past tours have included the Dallas Arboretum, the Fort Worth Botanical Research Institute, urban farms, a cut flower farm, an exotic wildlife center, the South Texas Botanical Gardens & Nature Center, the Sea Life Center, and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Fish Hatcheries.

As part of our conference we have an exhibit hall with well over 100 exhibitors. The main goal of this is to allow our teachers to connect with a variety of professionals who can offer them advice or sources of curriculum or supplies for the classroom. Our teachers love to mingle and talk with the exhibits and learn trends and new techniques to use with their students.

As districts in our state have faced budget issues, we now offer a virtual way to receive their credits. Workshops to be prerecorded and offered online are identified during our workshop selection process, we have begun recording in two rooms during Conference to gather more content for our teachers with our goal being to offer a minimum of 30 hours of recorded content.

Knowing that those in person can only attend a limited number of workshops, we leave the workshops open for credit for up to two months after the conference, so teachers can receive their hours. Past year's

conference workshops are available to our current members dating back to 2020.

Agricultural education in Texas has always had a great partnership with the Texas Farm Bureau. The education staff at Texas Farm Bureau wanted to help teachers beyond the tours and workshops at our conference they have traditionally provided, which led to the creation of the Early Career Ag Teacher workshop, for teachers in the first five years of their career. For the past two years, Texas Farm Bureau provides meals and housing during “a two-day workshop that immerses teachers in hands-on classroom/laboratory instruction focused on areas addressed in an agricultural science classroom (i.e., instruction, SAEs, and FFA).” Participants visit local agricultural businesses and bring

in experts, including the FFA and ATAT Executive Directors, for the teachers to build their toolbox. Next year the event will have two tracks, relating to floral design and agricultural mechanics. We are excited to see these play out.



Ray Pieniazek is currently serving as the Executive Director of the ATAT



Michelle Vasbinder is the Professional Development Coordinator of ATAT



Tori Rosser serves as Special Projects Coordinator for ATAT

North Carolina Pre-Service Agricultural Educators Retreat

by Dr. Travis Park, Dr. Misty Lambert, Mary Kate Lanier, Dr. Stephen Edwards, Kayla Paglia, & Morgan Simpson

Along the shores of the crystal waters of White Lake, North Carolina, sits the North Carolina FFA Center. Nestled among the tall cypress trees and beyond the bright pink sunsets lies a North Carolina gem, a piece of lakefront property commonly referred to as the “NC FFA Camp.”

The camp opened its doors in 1928 and has since served thousands of campers eagerly awaiting the opportunity to learn about agriculture and the FFA Organization. The center is home to many North Carolina FFA traditions, including the association’s recreational camp, State Leadership Conference, and various smaller camps each year. However, a camp specializing in the professional development of Preservice agricultural

teachers has recently surfaced at the FFA center, the NC Preservice Agricultural Teacher Retreat.

What is the NC Preservice Agricultural Teacher Retreat?

The NC Preservice Agricultural Teacher Retreat, often referred to as the “Teach Ag Retreat,” is a weekend event held

“Agricultural educators are a “tight-knit” community that serves as wonderful mentors and supporters to one another.”

annually at the NC FFA Center. The event unites undergraduate agricultural education students in North Carolina for a weekend filled with fun, education, and personal development.

The History of the NC Preservice Agricultural Teacher Retreat:

The Teach Ag Retreat began as just an idea when an NC State undergraduate student expressed difficulty recalling all the peers within their department. This student then expressed

that they certainly did not know the other students pursuing an agricultural education degree at the three other institutions offering such programs across the state.

During that time, the application was open for State Teach Ag Results (STAR) grant funds, which were offered by a partnership between the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE) and the CHS Foundation. Thus, an application was submitted in hopes of creating a program



(LEFT) Attendees taking advantage of “lake time” during the NC Teach Ag Retreat
(RIGHT) Retreat Attendees participating in a Food Science Workshop.



where agricultural education majors from across the state could meet and connect before entering their career field. The grant funds were graciously approved, and the NC Teach Ag Retreat was born. The idea has proved to be successful, as the retreat has been held annually since 2022.

Who is open to attend the NC Teach Ag Retreat?

The retreat serves undergraduate students who wish to pursue a career in agricultural education and attend any of the four North Carolina institutions with agricultural education degree programs. Those programs include North Carolina State University, the University of Mount Olive, North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University, and Appalachian State University. Freshmen to senior students are welcome and encouraged to attend the retreat at *no cost to them*. Thanks to our generous sponsors, food, housing, workshop materials, and a retreat memorabilia item (such as a t-shirt or toiletry bag) are offered to retreat attendees for free. Retreat leaders always inform attendees about the generous sponsorship provided by the STAR grant funds, and the

sponsorship is always met with overwhelming appreciation by the attendees.

Professional Development, Increasing Skillsets:

Endless opportunities for professional development await Teach Ag Retreat attendees. Retreat participants engage in educational workshops and seminars that provide both knowledge and hands-on skills for application in their future classrooms. In 2025, retreat attendees participated in food science, forestry, and FFA quiz bowl workshops. In the food science workshop, participants were instructed on the aroma and triangle test portions of the Career Development Event (CDE). The students also learned about America's food safety trends from Dr. Benjamin Chapman, a food safety expert and the head of the Agricultural and Human Sciences Department at NC State University. Attendees then participated in the Quiz Bowl workshop presented by Dr. Travis Park. In this workshop, participants learned the rules and regulations of the Quiz Bowl CDE while using the official state contest materials. Lastly, students attended a sawtimber workshop, where they were instructed on the proper way to measure the

sawtimber of a tree. This skill can be applied to various North Carolina natural resource curricula, as well as the forestry CDE.

Retreat staff, in cooperation with the STAR grant team, strive to design the retreat to be slightly different each year to build on the knowledge and skillsets of its attendees. In previous years, workshops on soldering copper pipes, PVC pipe plumbing, forestry orienteering, poultry judging, and floral bow tying have also taken place at the retreat.

Professional Development, Increased Leadership:

The agricultural education industry is arguably the most interconnected industry in the country. Consider all the other agricultural educators that you know throughout your own state association. If you are like most agricultural educators, you can name countless other advisors throughout the state, and you know advisors from chapters hours away from yours. This is because you frequently see the same faces at multiple events and interact with them. Agricultural educators are a "tight-knit" community that serves as wonderful mentors and supporters to one another. As a beginning

Retreat Attendees partaking in icebreaker activities on the first afternoon of the retreat.. (RIGHT) Retreat Attendees learning how to use a Biltmore stick to measure the sawtimber of a tree.





Retreat attendees in a human knot leadership game.

agricultural educator, making these connections with other agricultural educators is both extremely important and beneficial. Thus, presenting another benefit of the Teach Ag Retreat, the establishment of positive, life-long connections that occur between agricultural educators across the state.

Retreat attendees build these connections with future colleagues in a social environment. Each retreat begins with icebreaker activities, often in the form of large-group exercises to encourage participants to begin conversing with one another. Attendees often arrive at the retreat nervous to leave the side of their school peers. However, one of the first activities that occurs at retreat is the creation of intermixed “teams.” Each team includes members from different universities to increase camaraderie between students. Teams compete in bracket play for various competitive events, including volleyball, putt putt, corn hole, ping pong, pickleball, and a talent show, vying for points to win the retreat’s “banner battle.” Points are awarded based on the team’s performance in each event. At the conclusion of the retreat, the team with the most points wins the “camp banner.” The “camp banner” is a historic NC

the process of the “banner battle.” Students who were once afraid to interact with their new peers quickly become teammates who work together to win the banner. During retreat, strangers become team-mates, team-mates become friends, and those friends will one day become colleagues.

Education is another key component of the Teach Ag Retreat. Although educational components change slightly each year, commonly discussed topics include marketing FFA camp to their administration and future students, finding job openings in the state, selecting a student teaching location, making the most of your undergraduate experience, and effectively balancing life and work duties. Students are encouraged to ask questions and interact with agricultural education leaders throughout the process.

What are the impacts of Teach Ag Retreat?

The NC Teach Ag Retreat has served approximately 21 to 46 students a year since its creation in 2022. A total of 31 students have graduated with their undergraduate degrees since attending Teach Ag Retreat. 28 (90%) of those students have either entered the classroom and are currently teaching, or are actively pursuing their master’s degree.

Thus, this program is doing an incredible job at preparing and releasing students as leaders in the agricultural education field.

Teach Ag Retreat receives exceedingly positive feedback from its attendees and is highly anticipated each year. One of the authors personally attended the retreat as an undergraduate student and am now helping to facilitate the event as a graduate assistant for NC State. Therefore, they can personally vouch for the effectiveness of the experience. She says, “I have used the hands-on skills that I received at the retreat countless times in the classroom, and I can confirm that the individuals you meet at the retreat are the same individuals who become your colleagues after graduation. I reflect on my experiences as a retreat attendee and am met with fond memories of leadership games, playing in the lake, hanging out with new-found friends on the pier, and learning about the industry I fell in love with so long ago. You truly cannot put a price tag on the experience, and I am so thankful for NAAE and the CHS Foundation for providing the funds to make this experience possible.”

The North Carolina Teach Ag Retreat is truly a priceless experience that every agricultural education student should attend.



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Dr. Stephen Edwards is a full professor at the University of Mount Olive, where he currently serves as the Assistant Dean of the School of Agricultural and Biological Sciences.



Kayla Paulia is a Graduate Teaching and Research Assistant at North Carolina State University, where she is currently pursuing her graduate degree in agricultural education.



Morgan Simpson is a Graduate Research Assistant at North Carolina State University, where she is currently pursuing her master's degree in agricultural education.

From Preservice to Profession: How FAST Cultivates the Next Generation of Agricultural Educators

by Dr. Lavyne Rada

Across the nation, agricultural education programs face a familiar challenge: too few teachers to meet growing demand. The shortage of qualified School-Based Agricultural Education (SBAE) instructors continues to stretch programs thin and limit opportunities for students. In Minnesota, where the growth of SBAE has outpaced the supply of teachers, one question has guided our response: how can we help future agricultural educators see themselves as professionals and build networks and skills before they ever step into their own classrooms?

The answer, it turns out, begins long before student teaching.

Hosted in conjunction with the Minnesota Association of

Agricultural Educators' (MAAE) annual winter conference, FAST brought preservice teachers from across the Midwest together for a weekend of learning, networking, and mentorship.

Planting the Seeds of Belonging

When the Midwest Future AgriScience Teacher (FAST) Symposium began in 2019, it was a simple idea with a powerful goal: connect college students studying agricultural education to the professional community they would soon join. FAST is not another workshop or recruitment campaign. It is an early professional development experience intentionally designed to cultivate identity, confidence, and belonging among future

agricultural educators. The FAST Symposium brings together students from teacher preparation programs to learn, network, and engage in professional dialogue alongside practicing educators. After seven years of growth, the results are clear: when we plant seeds of professional connection early, our teachers are more likely to grow, thrive, and stay.

For a nominal fee, thanks to sponsorship and an investment from multiple Minnesota Team Ag Ed organizations, student participants received housing and meals, professional membership in MAAE and NAAE, and a personalized pre-conference focused on preparing these college students with the skills and knowledge needed as they en-

(LEFT) Participants of the Midwest Future AgriScience Teacher (FAST) Symposium.

(RIGHT) Early career teachers engage FAST participants in simple hands-on experiences, such as this sensory lab, that can be modified for a variety of topics to help build the resources early-career teachers have available.



tered the final months or years of their journey to the classroom.

Throughout the symposium, participants are immersed in the professional culture of agricultural education. Sessions are focused on building an understanding of the agricultural education network, licensure, applying for teaching jobs, negotiating teaching contracts, and building their own network of peers regardless of university or state affiliation. Numerous teacher panels of early-career teachers, cooperating teachers, and SBAE leaders also shared insight into preparing for student teaching and their first job. Participants then have access to the full MAAE conference. They attend teacher-led workshops, observe the mentoring that happens organically among peers, and begin to see themselves not just as students, but as future colleagues. All participants are introduced at a luncheon, and it is powerful to see the front of the room filled with future teachers.

“FAST made me realize that I wasn’t entering this profession alone,” one participant reflected. “It gave me the network I still rely on today.”

Learning Through Community

The structure of FAST draws from Wenger’s (1998) Communities of Practice framework that views learning as a social process shaped by shared participation and identity. Each year’s cohort becomes a living example of that model in action. Participants interact with peers and future colleagues while also

“FAST made me realize that I wasn’t entering this profession alone”

working alongside experienced teachers. They engage in reflective discussions about teaching and learning and join sessions that build on their knowledge and skills as a professional.

By situating learning in a community setting, FAST helps preservice teachers connect theory to lived experience. They see how agricultural educators collaborate, solve problems, and celebrate successes. They begin to develop their own professional

identity as a teacher, not as outsiders looking in, but as members of a thriving community.

For many students, it’s their first experience being treated as peers in the profession they aspire to join. The transition from university coursework to professional engagement builds confidence, broadens perspective, and often solidifies their decision to teach. Often connections

made at FAST result in more intentional decisions regarding field experience and clinical placements as preservice teachers learn about different parts of the state and work with teachers who may be future cooperating teachers or colleagues.

A Model Built on Collaboration

FAST is the product of collaboration among the partners in Minnesota’s Team Ag Ed. Each partner contributes unique strengths: universities recruit and prepare participants; MAAE provides access to professional networks and space at their conference; and all the partners and sponsors model the mentorship culture that new teachers will later experience in the field.



(LEFT) FAST participants work together to solve clues about agricultural education during a breakout box challenge. (RIGHT) FAST participants work in teams with students from multiple colleges to solve a riddle as part of the breakout box challenge



(LEFT) Past participants from FAST return to the Minnesota Association of Agricultural Educators winter professional development conference as first year teachers.
 (RIGHT) FAST participants introduce themselves to all conference attendees sharing where they are in their journey to becoming a teacher.

This integration ensures that FAST is not a standalone event, but a bridge within a continuum of support which connects preservice engagement, early-career induction, and ongoing professional learning. In many ways, FAST functions as the first step in Minnesota's teacher development path.

From Data to Impact

Over seven years, 161 unique preservice students attended FAST from six universities across four states. Our longitudinal analysis of program alumni revealed striking results: Of the 113 participants who have graduated, more than 80% entered the teaching profession after graduation, and nearly 80% of eligible graduates remained in the classroom beyond their first two years.

These outcomes highlight what many of us have long believed: early professional engagement matters. When preservice teachers begin forming their professional identity while still in college, they are more likely to stay connected to the SBAE community. This early experience through FAST fosters shared ex-

periences and network building that transform students from observers into participants. It allows them to learn alongside mentors, practice professional skills, and build confidence. The program doesn't just prepare teachers; it helps them belong.

Beyond the statistics, FAST participants consistently highlight the influence of the experience on their mindset and motivation. The opportunity to interact with practicing teachers, hear authentic stories, and participate in professional learning before licensure helps them visualize their future role and strengthens their resolve to stay the course.

Strengthening the Professional Pipeline

While FAST was created in response to Minnesota's teacher shortage, its success has implications far beyond state lines. The symposium has become a replicable model for early professional engagement and is one that other states could adapt to strengthen their own pipelines..

FAST's design addresses three critical recruitment and retention challenges:

1. Early Identity Formation – By immersing preservice teachers in professional communities, FAST helps them see themselves as agricultural educators early in their journey.
2. Mentorship and Connection – Through relationships with practicing teachers and peers, participants gain access to the same networks that sustain professionals later in their careers.
3. Practical Application – Exposure to workshops, discussions, and classroom strategies connects university preparation with real-world practice.

When viewed together, these elements create a powerful feedback loop. Preservice teachers feel supported, they persist through challenges, and they return as mentors to the next cohorts.

“Of the 113 participants who have graduated, more than 80% entered the teaching profession after graduation, and nearly 80% of eligible graduates remained in the classroom beyond their first two years.”

The Human Side of Preparation

FAST is also deeply personal. It reminds participants that teaching agricultural education is as much about connection as it is about curriculum. During sessions, students hear from panels of current teachers about why they chose this profession, experience the professional learning and mentoring that occurs through engagement in professional development, and learn strategies for maintaining balance and well-being.

In an era when teacher burn-out and attrition dominate headlines, FAST helps future educators build habits of lifelong learning and self-care early on. By normalizing conversations about resilience and support, the program equips them not only to enter the classroom but to stay.

Growing the Future Together

The success of the FAST Symposium underscores a simple but transformative truth: professional development doesn't have to wait until after graduation. When

preservice teachers are welcomed into the professional community early, they carry that sense of belonging with them throughout their careers.

Minnesota's experience shows that innovative, low-cost, high-impact initiatives can change the trajectory of teacher preparation. By investing in the professional identity of preservice teachers, we invest in the longevity of our programs, our classrooms, and our profession.

FAST began as a small seed of an idea to be a way to help students feel connected. Today, it stands as a model of how intentional community building can transform teacher development from the very beginning. It intentionally builds habits of young professionals to build a network of support so that teaching agriculture is more than just a job.

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Bridging Generations: Innovative Professional Development Connecting In-Service and Preservice Agriculture Teachers in Connecticut and Beyond

by Dr. Patricia Jepson & Amanda Thomson

When the University of Connecticut's future agriculture educators step into the field for the first time, they're not just learning lesson plans—they're discovering a community. As student Viavianne Vargas-Negron reflected, "Working alongside other agricultural educators and stakeholders showed me how collaborative and dynamic the Ag education community can be, and emphasized the importance of building professional networks early in a teaching career."

Collaboration between the Connecticut Association of Agriculture Educators (CAAE) and early-career teachers is fostered through a blended approach to professional development. A UConn summer graduate course, field experiences, conferences, committee work, and mentorship bring **preservice teachers and seasoned educators** together. They learn from one another, share experiences, and ultimately strengthen the future of agricultural education across the state. Agriculture teachers of all experience levels foster partnerships, build a sense of community, engage in experiential learning, and foster a sense of professional identity and recognition.

While small in stature, the Agricultural Education community in Connecticut is extensive and impactful. Programs reflect diverse communities and agricultural opportunities that range from our shorelines to farms, and

from urban to rural communities. Curriculum priorities are based on local community needs, student interests, and demographics. Communication and collaboration among schools, organizations, and other stakeholders are central to effective programs, knowledgeable educators, and mutually beneficial partnerships with relevant businesses and industries.

Partnerships between the Connecticut Association of Agricultural Educators (CAAE), the University of Connecticut's College of Agriculture, Health and Natural Resources and Neag School of Education, Connecticut State Department of Education, and Connecticut's Ag industry have all played a role in designing meaningful professional development programs. The value of professional development is emphasized starting in preservice years, recognized throughout active teaching employment, and continues into retirement for many.

The Connecticut Agricultural Education community serves as a hub of support for preservice, early career, and veteran teachers, actively sharing expertise and resources. This support encompasses opportunities provided by the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE). UConn undergraduate and graduate students



UConn TCPCG student Marissa Uva learns about propagation techniques during a field experience at Summer Hill Nursery.

alike are encouraged to participate in our state's NAAE's State Teach Ag Results (STAR) program, and STAR funds support student NAAE membership. Preservice teachers feel valued as members of the professional community and recognize the benefits of professional organizations and opportunities for long-term career viability.

The UConn summer Ag Ed Methods course is a cornerstone of the accelerated Teacher Certification Program for College Graduates (TCPCG) offered through the Neag School of Education. Each session of the six-week course emphasizes a different aspect of Ag Education and is hosted at a different agriculture education venue. The purpose of the course is to highlight the diverse range of programs housed in Connecticut and make meaningful connections with educators and industry partners.

UConn student Gabriella Courtois shared, "I thought the summer course did a great job of introducing and teaching me about Ag Education. My favorite part was being able to travel to different schools and meeting with teachers who work there. They were able to give me hands-on experience and show me what a day is like for an Ag teacher. We were able to experience SAE,

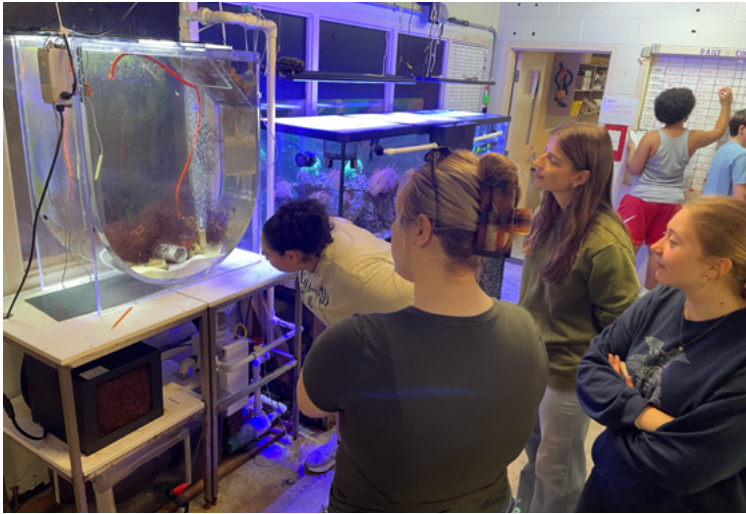
We hope that other states may also be encouraged to design intentional bridges between teacher preparation programs and state-level professional associations to narrow the generational gap between early career and veteran educators



(TOP) UConn TCPCG student Grace Kausyla and Southington High School ASTE Director, Owen McLaughlin, inspect a seining net for wildlife specimens during a visit to Hammonsett Beach State Park.

(BOTTOM) UConn TCPCG students get a hands-on demonstration of touch tanks as an educational tool at Hammonsett Beach State Park. Pictured from left to right: Southington ASTE Program Director & Ag Teacher, Owen McLaughlin; Park Ranger and Naturalist, Russ Miller; UConn TCPCG student, Gabriella Courtois.





(LEFT) UConn TCPCG students visit the aquaculture labs at Sound School to learn more about innovative school-based SAE placements.

(RIGHT) Recipients of the 2025 Jepson Ag Education Scholarship Award. Pictured from left to right: Donor, Dr. Patricia Jepson; UConn TCPCG students Viaivannie Vargas-Negron, Grace Kausyla, Marissa Uva. Not pictured: Gabriella Courtois.

school-based activities, FFA/leadership, Professional development, and Ag industry partnerships.”

For example, the class traveled to Sound School in New Haven, where they explored the challenges of urban education and learned about the school’s unique aquaculture program, including an innovative school-based SAE program. Another memorable experience was at the UConn Hartford County Extension Center, where students discovered potential partnerships with 4-H and toured the Auerfarm 4-H Education Center. Another class began with a tour of the Southington High School Agricultural Science and Technology Education (ASTE) facility; students then visited one of the largest nursery growers in the state, followed by Hammonasset Beach State Park, where they worked alongside teachers to collect specimens for the school’s touch tank.

The course featured other collaborations with members of the Agriculture Education community. Ledyard High School ASTE program director, Devon O’Keefe, presented an impactful lesson about differentiating Ag

instruction for students with special needs. Other guests included Harold Mackin, Education Consultant for the Connecticut Department of Education, and Dr. Patricia Jepson, UConn Professor Emeritus. The course format also included meaningful virtual experiences, including conversations with Ag teachers from Puerto Rico and Alaska, curriculum partners and sponsors, and, of course, NAAE’s own Ashley Rogers, who provided an enthusiastic and warm welcome to our professional community.

The experience also provided valuable networking opportunities. This not only supports the development of pre-service teachers, but also professional renewal for in-service teachers. Ag Educator Owen McLaughlin, who also serves as Director of the Southington ASTE program, shared, “I was inspired by my former mentor, who always thought it very important to support new teachers. I also enjoy showing prospective students what an awesome career it is to be an agriculture teacher.” The experience was “full circle” for Grace Kausyla, a former Southington High School student, now

pursuing her master’s degree and teaching certification. “Owen McLaughlin, who was not only my primary Ag teacher but also a mentor to me from high school through my undergraduate years, has had a lasting impact on my journey. I truly enjoyed hearing his perspective on teaching now that I’m a preservice teacher myself. Having strong connections within the agricultural education community has been such a blessing throughout my experience.”

Continued professional development is a year-round priority for all of Connecticut’s teachers. CAAE coordinates a full-day PD during the summer, incorporates sessions into meetings during the school year, and plans additional events based on interests and needs. UConn, the State Department of Education, and industry organizations also offer opportunities for continued education and skill development. Teachers identify needs and make connections to create meaningful programs. Preservice teachers attend the summer CAAE Day and are encouraged to take an active role in CAAE.

2025-26 CAAE President and Program Director of Middletown

High School ASTE, Rebecca Isaacson, launched a new mentorship program for beginning teachers this year. Isaacson explains, “The Early Career Collective is a critical initiative for CAAE members in their first zero to three years of teaching. Its primary goal is to combat early career attrition by providing targeted support. We understand that effective mentorship is key to teacher retention, and this collective directly addresses that need. We’ve fostered a supportive, connected community where new agriculture teachers can feel welcome and empowered. We meet regularly, primarily virtually, to focus on collaborative problem-solving specifically tailored to the unique complexities of agricultural education.” The program launched this past August and has enjoyed great success.

Time and finances are common challenges for preservice teachers, who are balancing the expectations and expenses of working towards teacher certification. To help address this, UConn’s Neag School of Education has partnered with several local school districts to facilitate paid “residency” positions, where preservice teachers gain practical experiences through additional

responsibilities during internship and/or student teaching semesters. STAR funds help defray travel and educational expenses for Ag Education students. Private donors and local school districts have also provided support for students to pursue professional development opportunities.

Patricia Jepson established an Ag Ed Professional Development fund for UConn Ag Education students, which was recently revised and restructured. In the past, students applied for funds to attend a week-long “Ag Mechanics Boot Camp” and other workshops to build content knowledge and skills. Now, funds may be used to help with clinical experiences, to participate in professional development, or to provide scholarships.

UConn TCPCG Program Director, Dr. Tracy Sinclair, is proud of the collaborative model of the program: “The hands-on experiences our preservice teachers receive in their courses and placements allow them to apply the pedagogical approaches rooted in best practices of agriculture education. There are a myriad of opportunities as an Ag educator; it is truly amazing.”

Connecticut’s close-knit Ag Education community, supported by

the University of Connecticut and other key partners and stakeholders, has established a roadmap for linking pre-service and in-service teachers through immersive and impactful learning experiences, leveraging existing talent by allowing in-service teachers opportunities to share their knowledge and demonstrate leadership, and encouraging pre-service teachers to be active participants in the professional Ag Education community. We hope that other states may also be encouraged to design intentional bridges between teacher preparation programs and state-level professional associations to narrow the generational gap between early career and veteran educators, and to address teacher recruitment and retention challenges. UConn student Marissa Uva reflected on her introduction to Ag Education: “The most valued interactions that I encountered were at the annual summer CAAE meeting. When all Connecticut’s Ag teachers gather in one facility, it was shocking, yet heartwarming, to see the close-knit community they have developed, which I am eager to be a part of.” It is our sincere hope that each of Connecticut’s future Ag teachers will feel the same.



Amanda Thomson is an Agriculture Science teacher at Middletown High School in Middletown, Connecticut, with more than 29 years of experience in the classroom. A career-long member of NAAE and CAAE, she also serves as an Academic Specialist in Ag Education for the University of Connecticut.



Patricia J. Jepson, Ph.D. is Associate Professor In-Residence in the Neag School of Education, Public Service Specialist in the Department of Extension, and Academic Advisory Center Director Emeritus for the College of Agriculture, Health and Natural Resources at the University of Connecticut. She served as UConn’s Ag Ed advisor and taught the TCPCG Ag Ed Teaching Methods course for many years. After retiring from her full-time position, she has continued her involvement in Ag Education at UConn and as Connecticut’s Ag Ed Specialist for the State Teach Ag Results (STAR) program.

Meeting the Challenges of the Early Years with the California New Professionals Institute

by Sandra Dale & Tanisha Norvell

The Challenge of the Early Years

Ask any veteran agriculture teacher the most challenging time in their career, and they'll likely pinpoint the period between year one and year three. But what makes those initial years so tough?

The early career agriculture teacher isn't just mastering the art of instruction; they are simultaneously juggling demands that set them apart from first-year teachers in other subjects. They must develop curriculum utilizing the Three-Circle Model, effectively manage a classroom, advise an FFA chapter complete with SAE projects, coach CDE and LDE teams, all while ensuring their personal life isn't completely going by the wayside.

Introducing the Grow AgEd Program

Recognizing this unique and demanding start, California has developed the Grow AgEd Program. This initiative delivers high-quality professional development specifically tailored to the diverse needs of agriculture teachers across the state. Studies confirm that professional development requirements vary significantly based on a teacher's experience level (DiBenedett et al., 2018). To address this, the Grow AgEd Program deliberately structures its support to provide varied opportunities based on a teacher's current career stage. Grow AgEd offers professional developments for preservice teachers through the Student Teacher Conclave, The Delta Conference which is a year long professional development oppor-

The New Professionals Institute (NPI) Conference at its core, is the complete package for supporting new agriculture teachers, helping them excel during those tough first three years instead of just merely surviving them.

tunity to increase the confidence and competence of teacher-leaders, The Cooperating Teachers Conference is designed to provide support to teachers serving as cooperating teachers to preservice educators during the credential program, and lastly, the New Professionals Institute Conference.

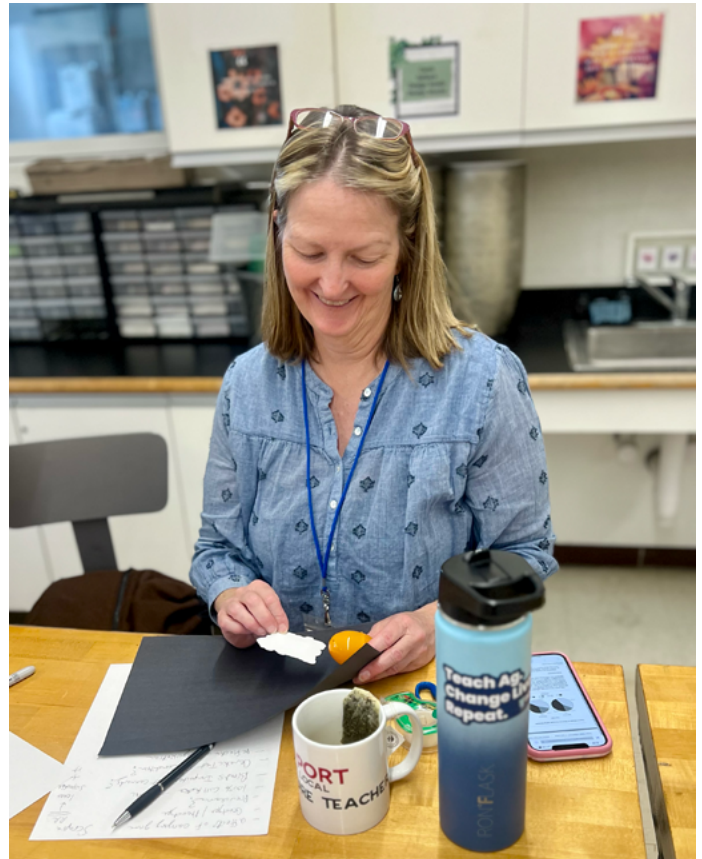
Learning from Veteran Educators and Building a Network

The New Professionals Institute (NPI) is a professional development opportunity designed exclusively for early career agriculture teachers in years one through three. Research suggests that the crucial needs of these new educators span areas such as: classroom and behavior management, content knowledge, FFA program development, and SAE management (Roberts et al., 2020). The two-day NPI Conference is crafted specifically to address these foundational needs with targeted workshops focusing on program management, classroom efficacy, FFA activities, and SAE facilitation.

In addition to the targeted workshops, the two-day conference provides teachers with the

invaluable opportunity to gain insight from veteran educators. These leaders generously share their hard-earned experiences and practical advice for navigating a successful, long-term career. Furthermore, participants have the chance to connect with fellow early career teachers, expanding their professional cohort, and to network with potential mentors and influential leaders across California agricultural education (New Professionals Institute, 2025).

Because of the continued need for high-quality ag teachers, not only in California, but across the nation, we are experiencing a growing number of agriculture teachers entering the profession directly from industry. During the 2024-2025 academic year, 14.3% of all agriculture teachers in the state started their career with an alternative teaching credential. While these educators bring with them invaluable real-world industry expertise and are, without a doubt, an asset to agriculture education, more often than not they have never had any sort of formal educator training. The New Professionals Institute, in addition to the aforementioned benefits,



(LEFT) Professional development tailored to each career stage is a hallmark of California's Group AgEd Program.

(RIGHT) Meeting the different professional development needs of each stage in a teacher's career is vital.

proves incredibly beneficial to this specific group of early career teachers. For many, The NPI Conference serves as their first real exposure to the comprehensive scope of agriculture education through the lens of an ag teacher.

Participation and Program Impact

The New Professionals Institute Conference consistently serves approximately 225 participants annually, demonstrating its wide reach. This program's success is underscored by recent participation data: of the 106 first-year agriculture teachers welcomed in California last year, over 60% attended the NPI Conference!

While the NPI Conference is already specifically designed to address the foundational needs of teachers in their first through third year, the specialized support is even more refined during the

conference's first day. Participants are strategically grouped based on their exact number of years teaching. This intentional design allows teachers to attend workshops alongside their peers, which enhances their ability to connect, relate to one another, and internalize the material being shared. By tailoring the workshops even more specifically to these peer groups, the Conference creates a supportive, high-impact space where early career teachers feel genuinely seen, heard, and supported. As one first-year participant stated, "This conference is at a great time of year to obtain fresh ideas, inspiration from veteran teachers, and a sense of community from teachers in the same situations."

A Robust Menu of Workshops

On average, first and second-year teachers can select from

a robust menu of 24 targeted workshops across the two-day conference. Sessions focused on classroom efficacy provide participants with concrete tools to engage all learners, integrating technology effectively, implementing diverse teaching strategies, and exploring specific content-based instruction. Additionally, workshops dedicated to FFA/SAE Excellence prepare teachers for coaching CDE and LDE teams, sharing innovative SAEP ideas, and mastering the mentorship of student-run enterprises. Finally, Program Management focused sessions advise teachers on topics such as effective time management, establishing powerful advisory committees and community connections, securing program funding, and developing a positive classroom culture. All workshops are hosted by high-quality, practicing ag teachers who are

currently excelling in these specific areas. In 2024, we saw workshops addressing key topics such as “*Surviving and Thriving as a Young Department Chair*,” “*ABCs of CDEs-Ag Mech Edition*,” and “*Cultivating Classroom Success*,” among many others.

Meanwhile, the third-year teachers swap the workshop setting and head into the field, embarking on a journey to build connections within the agricultural industry. This provides them with current, real-world context and resources to enrich their instructional programs. A highlight for many third year participants, one can be quoted saying “I’m also thankful to grow as a professional with industry experiences and opportunities at the tours.”

Investing in the Future of Agricultural Education

To make the New Professionals Institute (NPI) Conference even more impactful, participants have the valuable opportunity to earn one semester unit of credit for each year they attend. These academic units are essential for early career teachers, directly supporting their advancement across the salary schedule.

The program culminates in the recognition of Program Completers: teachers who have participated in the New Professionals Institute for all three eligible years. This status acknowledges their profound commitment to professional development and their dedication to excelling as young professionals in agricultural education. On behalf of the Grow AgEd Program Director and Teach Ag California (a statewide initiative adopted in 2014 to recruit, retain, and recognize high-quality agriculture teachers), Program Completers are formally awarded a certificate of completion and a commemorative gift celebrating their hard work and achievement.

The New Professionals Institute (NPI) Conference at its core, is the complete package for supporting new agriculture teachers, helping them excel during those tough first three years instead of just merely surviving them. By offering everything from specialized workshops tailored to specific cohort groups and relevant industry tours, to practical incentives like transferable credit and the respected Program Completer status, California is making a serious investment in keeping its

best teachers. This smart, layered approach to professional development means a stronger, more vibrant future for agriculture education, ensuring that students are guided by supported, skilled, and excited ag teachers.

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Sandra serves Agriculture Education, facilitating the professional development needs of Agriculture teachers in CA. She designs curricula, facilitates conferences, and works with secondary education partners and Agriculture Education State Staff to develop a strong continuum of professional development activities that support teachers from the beginning of their careers. This work has led to increased opportunities for teachers in the state to further develop their technical and pedagogy skills.



Tanisha Norvell is an experienced educator who began her career as a high school agriculture teacher, where she inspired students through hands-on learning and leadership development. She now serves as the Campaign Director for Teach Ag California, leading statewide efforts to recruit and support the next generation of agriculture teachers.

Innovative Professional Development Opportunities

by Tim Taylor & Rebecca Styles

The third line of the NAAE Ag Teacher's Creed states, "I will endeavor to develop professionally through study, travel, and exploration." This statement was the guiding force that launched an annual commitment to Oklahoma Agricultural Education instructors each summer during the Oklahoma Agricultural Education Teachers Association Summer Professional Development Conference.

For the past 5 years, this conference has been organized by Ag Educators for Ag Educators and held in different geographic areas of the state each summer. Similar to the format of the regional NAAE conferences, these two-day conferences focus on several sessions of teacher-led workshops, industry tours, AgEd facility tours, and networking opportunities designed to increase the fellowship, level of retention, and camaraderie among Oklahoma Ag Educators.

Through the work of several key stakeholders, tireless volunteers, and willing host Ag Education programs, what started as a way to share best practices from other Ag Educators has grown into a vehicle for increasing the quality of professional development provided to Oklahoma Ag Educators by allowing them to travel around the state, learn from each other directly, and gain primary source knowledge of agricultural industries in Oklahoma.

Collaboration is Key

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, many Ag Educators were looking for a way to stay connected, and members of the OAETA State Teach Ag Results (STAR) Committee worked to fill the need through professional and social virtual check-ins and hangouts over Zoom. Cameron Dale (an Ag Educator from Bartlesville, OK) and Mason Jones (an Ag Educator from Edmond, OK) were members of the STAR Com-

mittee when the idea was pitched to develop teacher-led professional development opportunities. The hope was that it would both allow teachers to collaborate as well as help with long-term teacher retention efforts (a pillar of the STAR Committee's purpose).

"Throughout our early career," Jones explained. "We had been repeatedly told by late-career teachers that our profession didn't meet as much as we used to (e.g., as professional improvement 'P.I.' groups, or county teachers, etc.). We both agreed that one of the best ways to foster retention was to create more opportunities for teachers to gather, share ideas, and socialize as a community. An increasing number of new teachers were from out of state, and we believed this would help welcome those teachers as well," Jones said.

Members of the STAR Committee reached out to other Oklahoma Ag Educators, faculty members and graduate students within the Department of Agricultural Education, Communications, and Leadership at Oklahoma State University,



(LEFT) Hands-on classroom activities are a focus in the teacher-led workshops presented annually at the OAETA Summer Professional Development Conference. From starting a "desk garden" to discuss turfgrass and other plant science topics (pictured from the 2021 conference) to developing plans for starting a county agricultural mechanics show, the topics strive to encompass the AgEd 3-circle model.



Visiting Agricultural Education program facilities during the OAETA Summer Professional Development Conference allows attendees an opportunity to learn more about different specialized classroom/laboratory spaces (including Shattuck High School's BBQ lab kitchen).

state and involving hundreds of Ag Educators in high-quality professional development.

Experts in Their Field

The “secret sauce” of success in attracting Ag Educators to attend the annual Summer Professional Development

Conference has been the variety of topics covered by Oklahoma Ag Educators in the teacher-led workshop presentations. Starting in the early spring of each year, members of the conference organizing committee send out virtual surveys to Oklahoma Ag Educators to gauge their interest in workshop topics as well as their willingness to lead a 45-minute workshop. The results are

used by committee members to further reach out to specific Ag Educators who are knowledgeable about the surveyed responses. Each year, the number of conference registrants always increases after the confirmed list of workshop presenters is made public at the annual area meetings.

Another aspect of the teacher-led workshops is that they are all recorded and archived for conference attendees to view later. Through the support of OSU's Agricultural Education faculty and graduate students, the workshops are recorded on equipment normally used to capture pre-service AgEd students' early teaching experiences. The SWIVEL equipment and software allow the workshops to be captured and uploaded to the STAR

These two-day conferences focus on several sessions of teacher-led workshops, industry tours, AgEd facility tours, and networking opportunities designed to increase the fellowship, level of retention, and camaraderie among Oklahoma Ag Educators.

and state AgEd staff to develop a six-session virtual professional development series hosted on Zoom in July of 2020.

The idea was simple: bring together members of Oklahoma's Teach Ag “Team” to provide relevant, accessible, and high-quality teacher-led workshops to Oklahoma's Ag Educators that focused on addressing topics found within each of the three circles of agricultural education's three-circle model.

An event like this requires help from a variety of sources, including logistical help from State AgEd Staff, volunteers, and technology from university departments, willing committee members from state AgEd Teacher Associations, and passionate teacher workshop presenters and industry tour hosts.

The 2020 virtual professional development workshop series was very successful, with Ag Educators from around the state logging on to hear other teachers present on topics such as animal science, plant science, classroom management techniques, FFA chapter best practices, shop projects, and much more. The series went so well that the STAR Committee decided to allocate a portion of their grant budget to organizing an in-person PD conference in 2021 and formally bring in members of the OAETA Professional Membership Committee to aid in the planning and logistics of an in-person conference.

Both committees have been instrumental in conducting a Summer Professional Development Conference each summer, rotating locations throughout the different geographical areas of the

(RIGHT) Agricultural Industry tours allow OAETA Summer Professional Development Conference attendees an opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge about different agricultural businesses and industries throughout the state, including Oklahoma Steel & Wire (pictured during the 2023 conference).

Committee's YouTube page for Ag Educators to view after the conference, either as a reminder of content discussed or as a way to view all workshops presented at the conference, regardless of whether they were scheduled for the same time.

In recognition of the high quality of workshops presented each summer, the OAETA Board of Directors approved reimbursing the material costs of Ag Educators who presented workshops that focused on hands-on, tangible, and relevant classroom/lab topics. This allowed those workshop presenters to provide participants with examples of classroom or lab activities during the workshop.

Think Outside the Classroom

For the last three years, the OAETA Summer Professional Development Conference has been rotating its location throughout the state (2021 - Central Area, 2023 - Southeast Area, 2024 - Southwest Area, and 2025 - Northwest Area). Post-conference surveys have shown that this has increased the participation of Ag Educators in the conference due to its proximity to their programs. Similar to the NAAE Regional Conferences held each summer, the plan is to continue to rotate the Summer Professional Development Conference through Oklahoma's 5 areas.

Since the OAETA committee structure incorporates representatives from each area on the committees, members play



an important role in selecting, contacting, and scheduling both host locations for the conference's teacher-led workshops and meals, but also the few agricultural industry tours offered within each conference.

A goal for the conference is to incorporate Ag Education host facilities so that participants can see a variety of Ag Education programs, which include single or multi-teacher programs, urban or rural programs, and those programs with specialized classroom or laboratory spaces. Each morning of the conference includes time for participants to meet with the Ag Education host instructors and conduct a tour of each facility.

Another benefit of rotating the conference throughout the state is the ability to incorporate a wide variety of agricultural industry tours into the conference schedule. These tours are often specialized to each geographic area and provide conference participants with first-hand knowledge of different aspects of the agricultural industry that can be used when presenting content to students in the classroom. Post conference surveys have indicated that the industry tours are a valuable component

of the overall experience to Ag Educators. Examples of previously attended industry tours include Top Notch Turfgrass, Oklahoma Steel & Wire, and Savage Pecan Equipment (SE Area), Cimmaron Trailers, Wichita Mountain Wildlife Refuge, and row crop farms (SW Area), Micro-Distillery and meat processing facilities (NW Area).

Planning for the Future

The OAETA Summer Professional Development Conference would not be possible without the imagination and initiative of those who started the first conference in 2021, the hard work of members of STAR and Professional Development Committees, the support of the OAETA Board of Directors, the support from Oklahoma CareerTech Agricultural Education Staff, the support from Oklahoma State University's Department of Agricultural Education, Communications, and Leadership, the support from the many Ag Education program host sites, and the willingness of companies who open their doors for industry tours.

Each year, the Summer Professional Development Conference also hosts a dinner for participants at the end of the first day for fellowship and networking. At the dinner and

throughout the conference, raffle prizes are awarded (usually donated by Ag Education host programs, the STAR Committee, and/or industry partners). There is also a fundraiser for the NAAE Ag Ed Relief Fund.

As it was recently announced that the NAAE Region 2 Conference will be held in Southeastern Oklahoma in 2026, OAETA has decided to postpone its 2026 Summer Professional Development Conference until the summer of 2027 so that all resources can be aimed at developing a high-quality experience for Region 2 participants.

We look forward to hosting the next OAETA Summer Professional Development Conference, summer of 2027, in the Northeast Area of Oklahoma.



Tim Taylor is an agricultural education instructor at Sequoyah (OK) Public Schools, is in his 8th year of teaching agricultural education, and serves as the chair of the OAETA Professional Membership Committee.



Rebecca Styles is the agricultural education instructor at Norman (OK) Public Schools, is in her 6th year teaching agricultural education, and serves as the secretary of the OAETA Professional Membership Committee.

Kentucky Master Agriculture Teacher Program

by Matt Chaliff

The Kentucky Master Agriculture Teacher Program (KMAT) has been helping Kentucky teachers of agriculture grow into leaders in the profession for over ten years. The program began in 2014 with two overarching goals. First, to help good teachers become great teachers and second to develop a leadership pipeline for the profession.

KMAT is a two-year leadership program, usually involving a group of 12-15 teachers from across the state. To be admitted to the program, a teacher must complete an application that includes a recommendation letter from their principal. Teachers are selected for the program based on a variety of factors with a goal of getting a “class” with a diverse set of experiences, talents, and abilities that they can share with other participants.

Each KMAT class comes together in the fall of the first year for some personal development

and team building activities. Normally, a personality test of some kind is part of this introductory meeting and each team also participates in low and high ropes. In spite of the fact that Kentucky is a fairly small state with around 325 teachers of agriculture, there are always teachers at this initial meeting who don't know each other at all, so this time has been particularly valuable to the health and success of the class.

While the program has evolved some over time, there are normally six or seven sessions counting the program wrap up. Each session has its own theme but will often include some additional components as well.

One session of the program always includes a heavy focus on the agriculture industry. This has included industry tours with various partners and has included discussions about technology in agriculture, labor issues including the H2A program, and trends in the agriculture industry. This session is developed with a goal of giving

teachers experiences that they can take back to their classrooms and share with their students. The current group (KMAT Class V) will be going to Hopkinsville, Kentucky in September where they will tour a dark fired tobacco farm, spend time on a large multi-generation grain farm, tour an agricultural processing facility, and spend time at the Breathitt Animal Diagnostic Lab.

Another session is very focused on workforce development and includes interaction with higher education (both a university and a private welding school) as well as various employers in the agricultural industry. Kentucky FFA Foundation Staff also take part in this session and talk with teachers about developing materials for marketing the program locally and provide insight into building community support.

Each KMAT class also spends time in Frankfort during the legislative session. In addition to meeting with members of the General Assembly, participants have the chance to meet a lob-



KMAT graduates are much more willing to engage with business and industry and policy makers as a result of their experiences in the program.

KMAT Class II during the agriculture tour session in the Hopkinsville area. Dark fire tobacco producer Bob Lawrence gave KMAT participants a great tour of his operation, discussed the challenges and benefits of H2A labor, and then provided a wonderful meal at his farm.



byist and visit with Career and Technical Education state leadership about various issues. It is very common to have as many as half of the participants state that this session was their first visit to the State Capitol and/or their first interaction with legislators and each group finds this to be especially valuable.

KMAT classes also take an out of state trip. The location and format of this trip has varied over the years but the goal has been to expose teachers to something that they would normally not be a part of. Class V is going to be doing an out of state agriculture tour throughout the southeastern United States with a mix of farm and industry tours along with some sightseeing.

Each KMAT class has also taken on a project to improve something within the Ag Education Profession. Class I helped revise the Kentucky FFA Chapter Rating form and process- something that hadn't been tackled in decades. Another group spent time brainstorming how to improve professional development offerings for teachers- some of their recommendations were put into practice this summer with a

weeklong Animal Science Institute and a day of hands-on training for a variety of pathways.

Thanks to the support of the Kentucky Corn Growers Association, the Office of Career and Technical Education, and the Kentucky FFA Foundation, this program has been offered to teachers at very low cost. Hotel rooms, meals, and other expenses are covered and districts are reimbursed for substitute teacher costs. Teachers and/or their districts are responsible for travel to the meeting sites and a few incidental costs along the way.

State Staff have made a concerted effort to make this program feel special for teachers. Participants get a backpack and jacket as part of the program as well as a banner for their classroom upon graduation. Participants are referred to as "Master Ag Teachers" and staff have worked to ensure quality meals and lodging accommodations during each meeting.

KMAT has had very positive results for the Agricultural Education profession in Kentucky. First, KMAT has brought teachers together from across the state and helped them form stronger

As part of the KMAT program, each class spends two days in the state capital. Participants meet with leadership from the Kentucky Department of Education and Kentucky Department of Agriculture and also spend time visiting with legislators at the State Capitol. In every class at least a few participants have stated that it was their first visit to the Capitol and/or their first interaction with policy makers.

networks. We see KMAT graduates making a concerted effort to attend FFA Camp together and stay connected in other ways through future years. Second, KMAT graduates have stepped into leadership roles within the profession. Nearly every officer and committee chair within the Kentucky Association of Agricultural Educators since 2018 has been a KMAT participant or graduate. This has served to make leadership younger and a bit more future focused.

KMAT participants and graduates have also stepped up to serve as mentors for new teachers and to lead professional development for other teachers on an ongoing basis. It has also been observed that KMAT graduates are much more willing to engage with business and industry and policy makers as a result of their experiences in the program.

Kristan Wright was a participant in KMAT Class II while teaching at Seneca High School in Louisville and now serves as an Agricultural Education Consultant in the Department of Education and as the State FFA Advisor. Wright said, "The Kentucky Master Agriculture Teacher Program is an amazing two-year opportunity that challenges educators to grow both professionally and personally. From my own experience, I valued the chance to deepen my knowledge of Kentucky agriculture while building lasting con-

nections with the other teachers in my cohort.”

KMAT has not been without its challenges. Scheduling meetings around the demands of Ag Teacher and State Staff schedules requires some very close coordination. Historically many meetings were held on a Thursday through Saturday, but teachers have recently asked to shift to a Sunday afternoon-Tuesday format. In spite of the best efforts, there are often participants who have to miss a meeting due to personal or work commitments.

Initially a book study with regular meetings was included in KMAT. Participants in Class I shared that they didn't have time for the regular meetings. They agreed to be very focused on KMAT during meetings and then focused on home and work the rest of the time. Based on this and feedback from other participants, a book study and monthly meetings have not been included in the program again.

The success of KMAT has led to calls for a program for older teachers. While nothing has been determined yet, conversations have centered around doing something for teachers with over 20 years of experience. Suggested topics have included helping transition the program to a new teacher, growing your successor, and various things related to retirement and aging.

The Kentucky Master Agriculture Teacher Program has done much to provide opportunities for teachers in years five through

fifteen of their careers. In turn, these teachers have done much to provide better opportunities for their students locally and have become great leaders for the profession as a whole. This purposeful investment in helping good teachers become great teachers has paid dividends for the state and total program of agricultural education.



Matt Chaliff has served as an Agricultural Education Consultant and Kentucky FFA Executive Secretary since 2004.

The Right Tools for the Job: Equipping CTE Teachers for Success Through the CTE Teaching Academy

by Brynn Tinker & Dr. Tyson Sorenson

A farmer would never be expected to grow crops without adequate seeds and equipment. A mechanic would not be expected to rebuild an engine without the proper tools. Yet, many new teachers who come into the agricultural education profession through alternative routes are expected to succeed without much pedagogical training in such areas as managing behavior, developing curriculum, running an FFA chapter, and supervising SAEs. In many cases, if the training is available, too many barriers exist for new teachers to access those resources. If barriers can't be removed, teachers can become frustrated, overwhelmed, and may give up on teaching. In an effort to remove such barriers,

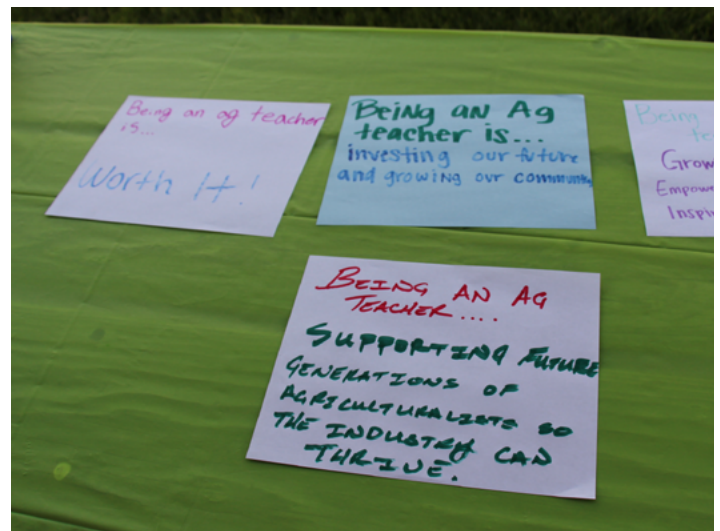
Utah State University has created a program called the **CTE Teaching Academy** to help non-traditionally licensed (we use this term to encompass all teachers who enter teaching without going through a traditional teaching program leading to licensure) access the resources they need to be successful while also removing barriers for them to do so.

Utah is among the many states who are struggling to find qualified teachers in CTE areas, which has opened the doors to others who have not gone through a traditional teacher preparation program. During the 2023–2024 school year in Utah, Career and Technical Education was designated a “shortage area,” with more than 35% of CTE teachers holding non-licensed

or provisional status. (Utah State Board of Education, 2024). These non-traditionally licensed CTE teachers are critically important in keeping programs from shutting down. As these teachers enter the profession, they are tasked with obtaining a teaching license and the proper endorsements to teach within their disciplines. The requirements for obtaining the license and endorsement generally require university coursework to be completed within a certain timeframe, generally pedagogy-focused courses completed within three years. However, these courses are often costly, inconveniently scheduled and located, time-intensive, and not relevant to CTE; barriers that can discourage non-traditionally licensed teachers from meet-

(LEFT) New Ag Teacher Seminar held each year in October for new agriculture teachers (traditionally certified and alternative route to licensure).

(RIGHT) Thoughts written by teachers new to the Ag Ed profession on what it means to be an agriculture teacher.



ing the requirements and may contribute to early exit from the profession. The CTE Teaching Academy focuses on providing CTE teachers with relevant pedagogical coursework required for licensing (and endorsement in agricultural education) while removing key barriers.

Addressing Barriers Through the CTE Teaching Academy

Cost Barrier

Changing career fields can create financial strain, and requiring expensive coursework for beginning CTE teachers, especially those who already hold a bachelor's degree in a related discipline, can be discouraging. Many new teachers also face additional costs such as professional association dues, insurance, and membership fees, prompting them to question whether a teaching salary justifies these expenses. To address this concern, the CTE Teaching Academy was developed to offer courses through Continuing Education Units (CEUs), providing a more affordable alternative to traditional graduate-level university courses. These CEU options are particularly appropriate for teachers at the start of their careers. All courses, however, are also available for academic credit if desired.

Inconvenient Schedule and Location Barrier

Many teachers, especially those in rural areas, are often excluded from in-person courses due to the long distances required for travel and the inconvenient schedule to attend courses after working a full day at the school (Glover et al., 2016). Yet, in some cases, some of the required coursework for teachers to obtain their license is still only offered as

in-person course options. While remote classes are sometimes offered, scheduling conflicts often make participation difficult. In the past, teachers were required to travel to designated sites to access synchronous online courses, typically held after school hours, which placed additional strain on personal time and proved especially challenging during the busy CTSO competition season. The CTE Teaching Academy addresses this challenge by offering all courses fully online and asynchronously, allowing teachers to engage with relevant content anytime and anywhere.

Time Intensive Barrier

Teaching in secondary school settings requires a highly structured schedule dictated by the school calendar and bell schedule, along with additional commitments such as student activities, trips, contests, sports, and family responsibilities. Teachers seeking to fulfill requirements for their license or endorsement need flexibility to complete coursework as their teaching demands fluctuate. The CTE Teaching Academy meets this need by offering self-paced courses that allow teachers to progress through material at their



Why Choose USU's CTE Teaching Academy



100% online & mostly self-paced



Relevant, real-world teaching strategies for CTE Teachers



Aligned with professional standards and licensure requirements



Affordable options for growth and advancement

Utah State University

- Leading the way in CTE educator preparation and training
- The CTE Teaching Academy is housed in the Applied Sciences, Technology and Education Department at USU

Who It's For

Current CTE Teachers

- Looking to refresh or enhance your teaching skills?
- Join our online, mostly self-paced pedagogy courses—designed specifically for CTE educators.

Teachers Seeking Licensure

- Need coursework aligned with APPEL requirements?
- Our courses offer a CTE-specific pathway to professional licensure.

Postsecondary Instructors Without Teacher Training

- Our CTE-focused pedagogy courses help you build essential teaching skills, even if your background is industry-specific.

Educators Pursuing Lane Changes or Relicensure

- Affordable, flexible options available for Academic credit & Continuing education credit
- Choose what best fits your professional goals.

USU's CTE Teaching Academy meets the needs of CTE Educators.

Utah data indicates a growing reliance on nontraditional licensure routes to fill teaching vacancies.

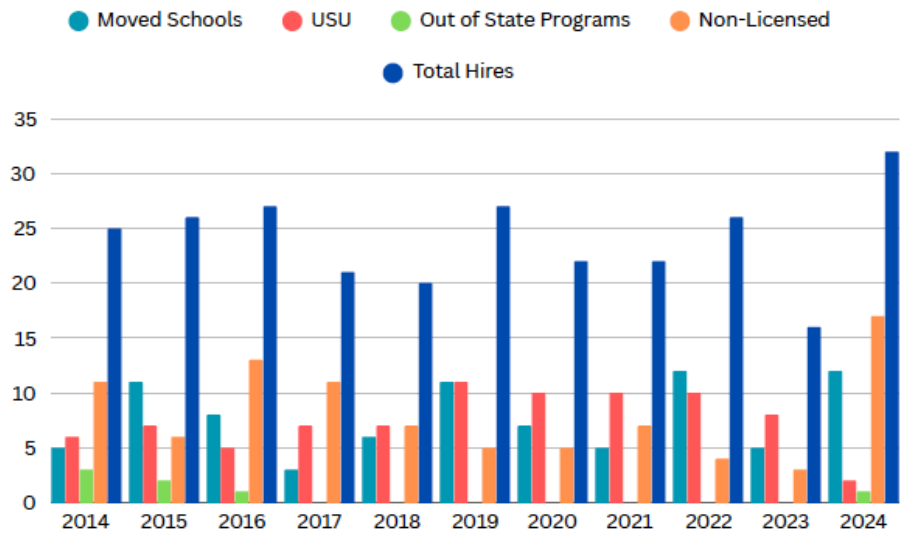
own convenience throughout the semester. During slower periods, they can complete multiple modules, then pause when instructional or extracurricular responsibilities increase. Additionally, many districts allocate time for professional development, providing opportunities for teachers to engage in these online courses during paid work hours.

Relevance Barrier

CTE teachers are sometimes frustrated with professional development experiences that do not seem relevant to them and their teaching practices (Rivera, 2024). General, core-content professional development rarely addresses their unique challenges, and finding relevant, high-quality training opportunities can be difficult. For many CTE teachers, completing coursework that offers little applicable value can feel like a waste of time and can lead to frustration or disengagement. Professional development, including coursework for required licensure, should have a clear purpose and tangible benefits (Rivera, 2024). CTE teachers need content-specific opportunities that directly support their instructional and professional growth. The CTE Teaching Academy coursework is focused specifically on CTE teachers. All modules and content are contextualized with CTE examples, providing relevance for the CTE teachers.

The CTE Teaching Academy

The CTE Teaching Academy offers a unique opportunity for current CTE teachers who need a teaching license by aligning directly with Utah's licensure and endorsement requirements. This alignment provides a clear, structured pathway for non-traditionally licensed CTE teachers



The CTE Teaching Academy focuses on providing CTE teachers with relevant pedagogical coursework required for licensing while removing key barriers.

to obtain their required credentials while also strengthening their practical teaching skills and knowledge.

The CTE Teaching academy currently offers five courses designed specifically for CTE professionals: Methods of Teaching Career and Technical Education, Course and Curriculum Development in Career and Technical Education, Evaluation and Assessment in Career and Technical Education, Digital Tools for Teaching and Learning in Career and Technical Education, and Classroom and Laboratory Management in Career and Technical Education. Each course focuses on real-world practices that help CTE teachers be successful.

Non-traditionally licensed agriculture teachers complete a separate course focused on SAE and FFA management. While this course is not formally part of the CTE Teaching Academy, it follows the same accessible format: affordable, online, primarily self-paced, and offered

for CEU credit. Participants also benefit from direct interaction with the state FFA Executive Director, who serves as the course instructor, providing valuable connections and support to the new teachers.

Because all courses are online and self-paced, teachers can complete their work when it best fits their schedules. This flexibility, combined with affordable tuition options and the ability to earn either academic credit or CEU credit, makes the academy accessible to teachers at any stage of their careers.

Beyond supporting those working toward licensure, the CTE Teaching Academy is also ideal for experienced CTE teachers looking to refresh their skills, meet professional development requirements, or pursue lane changes and re-licensure. Additionally, post-secondary instructors without formal teacher training can benefit from the program's emphasis on pedagogy. By combining flexibility,

affordability, and relevance, the CTE Teaching Academy serves as a powerful resource for all educators dedicated to advancing high-quality CTE instruction.

Conclusion

The CTE Teaching Academy can serve as an important tool for teachers entering agricultural education through non-traditional routes, aligning with state licensure and endorsement requirements and offering relevant, flexible and affordable online courses providing the clear path without barriers. Just as a mechanic depends on the right tools to complete each job, new teachers deserve access without barriers to the right tools of meaningful preparation and support.

Because the CTE Teaching Academy is online, CTE Teachers from across the country can benefit. Teachers and professionals who are interested in learning more about this program or to register for courses can visit the CTE Academy website at https://www.usu.edu/degrees-majors/career-and-technical-education-teaching-academy_icp. More information is also available by contacting the authors.

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Investing in People: How Professional Development Scholarships Strengthen Retention in Agricultural Education

by Catie Rowe

Across the country, agricultural education programs continue to face a similar challenge: keeping great teachers in the profession. While recruitment remains important, the long-term sustainability of school-based agricultural education (SBAE) depends equally on retention—ensuring that passionate, skilled educators not only enter the classroom but choose to stay for the long run.

At New York Agricultural Education Outreach, we see the value in intentionally investing in our agricultural educators to provide them with opportunities to attend professional development trainings that will enhance their skills, knowledge bases, and overall classroom experiences;

not only for their students, but for themselves as well. When awarded intentionally, these scholarships provide more than financial aid—they can renew a teacher's purpose, expand their skills, and reaffirm their belonging in the broader agricultural education community. We have been incredibly fortunate in our state to work with key stakeholders that allow us to create a scholarship program that has a wide reach in both recipients and content area for trainings.

Our stakeholders at Cornell University, the New York Department of Agriculture and Markets, and the CTE Technical Assistance Center of NY allow us to give our teachers choice in their professional development, giving them

the opportunity to fit and fill the specific needs of their students and their communities. Through our Rigorous and Relevant Professional Development Program, educators at all stages of their careers can apply for funds up to \$1,000 to attend any professional development training outside of what our teacher organization, the New York Association of Agricultural Educators, already offers. Teachers have used these funds for CASE4Learning full and brief-CASE institutes, Briggs and Stratton Small Gas Engines Trainings, Lincoln Electric Welding Courses, New York Botanical Gardens Teacher Educator Trainings, Germinate Green and Growing Conferences, Global Teach Ag Network International Professional Development seminars and initiatives, and so much more.

Our educators also can leverage funds from multiple sources to get the most opportunity with the fewest number of barriers. Teachers in New York can combine scholarships received from Farm Credit East and CASE4Learning to attend week-long, in-depth courses across the country focusing in the eight agriculture, food, and natural resource pathways. We also offer an Agricultural Education

NY agriculture teacher participating in an in-state CASE Animal Health and Veterinary Science conference. More than 75% of the participants in this conference received a scholarship and were from NY.



Incentive Grant Program for new and growing programs in the state. These grants are non-competitive and are awarded to programs every year that they apply. For the 2025-2026 school year, new programs received \$4,000 grants and growing programs received \$1,500. Schools are considered new programs for three years as they continue to make progress towards implementing a comprehensive agricultural education program,

then they are considered growing programs. These funds can be used to support conference registration costs for students and teachers, professional development trainings, classroom or laboratory equipment or software, and more.

We also recognize that hosting a wide variety of professional development conferences in different areas around our state removes barriers and allows

for teachers to access training that is close to home while still providing meaningful trainings, skills, and content to be brought back to the classroom. Outside of the Rigorous and Relevant Professional Development Scholarship, we also offer partial scholarships for educators to attend our yearly New York Association of Agricultural Educators June Professional Development Conference. This conference brings together over one hundred and fifty educators from across the state, and some of the surrounding states, together for workshops offered by their peers, collegiate educators, industry partners, and more. We also build time into the conference for educators to network with their colleagues through challenge activities, downtime, make-and-take activities, and more. Every year that a teacher participates in our annual conference, their professional membership dues to both the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE) and the New York Association of Agricultural Educators (NYAAE) are included in the cost of their registration. Solidifying the importance of staying engaged in professional organizations and trainings.

Retention is not just about numbers—it's about program stability and quality



Why Professional Development Matters

Research from the *Journal of Agricultural Education* demonstrates that teachers who engage in meaningful professional development are more likely to remain in the profession. But beyond



(TOP) Participants at the 2025 NYAAE Conference Award Banquet, participants raise funds during this banquet to help support yearly scholarships for the next year's conference. (BOTTOM) Participants at the 2025 CASE AFNR Conference at Canton High School where 50% of the participants were current NY agricultural educators.

Participant rewiring a building at Oswegatchie Educational Center as a part of the NYAAE Electrical Bootcamp. NYAAE Sponsored this event at a low cost for all participants.

participation, access matters—and that's where scholarships play a pivotal role.

Professional development scholarships do more than offset costs. They serve as a tangible investment in teachers' professional growth and personal well-being. When a teacher receives financial support to attend a conference, enroll in a course, or pursue a certification, the message is clear: *you matter, and your growth is worth supporting.*

Key Benefits of PD Scholarships:

1. Renewed Professional Identity-

Agricultural educators often thrive on purpose and connection. Scholarships that allow them to attend high-impact professional development—like the NAAE Convention, CASE-4Learning Institutes, or regional teacher academies—reignite enthusiasm and reinforce their professional identity.

2. Relevance and Innovation-

Agriculture is an ever-evolving field. Professional development opportunities keep teachers current on emerging topics like sustainable agriculture, biotechnology, and the classroom integration of new agricultural technologies. Staying relevant helps teachers keep curriculum fresh and engaging, making their work feel dynamic rather than stagnant. It also allows for students to be adequately equipped to enter the talent pipeline for the agricultural workforce—either directly after graduation or after pursuing post-secondary education opportunities.



3. Building Professional Community-

One of the most powerful retention factors in agricultural education is community. Scholarships often open doors to national and regional networks where teachers share ideas, find mentors, and feel less isolated. That sense of belonging can be transformative, especially as often, schools only have one agricultural educator so there is no one else in the building that is integrating the three-circle model with classroom, FFA, and supervised agricultural experiences.

4. Pathways to Leadership-

Teachers who access professional development scholarships often go on to present workshops, serve on leadership committees both in their state

and community and out of it, or mentor peers. These opportunities deepen commitment to the profession and foster leadership that strengthens the field.

Understanding the Retention Challenge

Teacher retention has long been a focal point in agricultural education research. The *National Agricultural Education Supply and Demand Study* consistently highlights shortages across states, with hundreds of open positions each year and an ongoing need to attract and keep qualified educators. We know that agriculture teachers wear many hats—classroom instructor, FFA advisor, Supervised Agricultural Experience supervisor, community liaison, and program recruiter and builder. It's meaningful work but it is also demanding.

Retention is not just about numbers—it's about program stability and quality. When trained teachers leave, communities lose institutional knowledge, students lose mentorship, and programs lose continuity. Supporting teachers to thrive at every career stage is therefore a key strategy to sustain and grow agricultural education nationwide. At its core, investing in professional development scholarships is about investing in people. Retaining agricultural educators isn't just about keeping classrooms staffed—it's about sustaining a pipeline that connects students to food, fiber, natural resources, and the future of our agricultural systems.

When teachers feel valued, supported, and inspired, they give that same energy back to their students. They innovate, they lead, and they stay. Professional development scholarships are more than financial awards—they are statements of belief in the future of agricultural education. They affirm that the field's greatest asset is its people and that retaining them requires ongoing care, investment, and connection. As state associations, universities, and partners continue to innovate around teacher retention, professional development scholarships will remain a central tool in the collective retention strategy. When we invest in teachers' growth, we not only help them stay—we help them soar.



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No More Dusty Tools: Preparing Ag Teachers for Experiential Learning

by Tyren Harris, University of Kentucky, Individual Essay

Imagine this: Mr. Montgomery, a new teacher, finished his first three months in the classroom. His bulletin boards are still a hit, his class seats are filled, and he's covered topics ranging from soil science to beef production. But something feels off. His students can recite vocabulary terms, yet when asked to apply their knowledge, they hesitate. The greenhouse sits underused, the shop tools gather dust, and when a student asks how to start their first SAE, Mr. Montgomery pauses—not because he doesn't care, but because he never truly practiced how to guide such. Agricultural education is built on experiential learning, yet many new teachers struggle to implement it like Mr. Montgomery. This does not mean new teachers cannot succeed, but it does highlight the need for change. Therefore, teacher preparation programs must increase curriculum integration, management training, and mentorship exposure to better prepare future agricultural educators to grow the next generation of agriculturalists.

Learn by Doing. One of the most effective ways to help future teachers master experiential learning is to let them experience it. According to the Association for Experiential Learning (2024), "Experiential education is a teaching philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop

skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities." Teachers must practice this style of learning firsthand to apply it effectively in their classrooms. In higher education, experiential opportunities often take the form of internships, practicums, service learning, student teaching, and research (UEU, 2024). Unity Environmental University (2024) adds, "experiential education helps students gain a deeper grasp of course topics and skills."

but also built transferable skills in crop rotation, maintenance scheduling, and student engagement—skills directly applicable to other projects. Expanding such opportunities to include SAEs, hydroponic container farms, and larger school farms can prepare future teachers to manage real-world systems. These experiences give novice educators the confidence and organizational skills needed to ensure experiential learning is consistent and effective in agricultural classrooms.

“One of the most effective ways to help future teachers master experiential learning is to let them experience it.”

These findings suggest that the more exposure teachers gain to experiential learning in college, the better prepared they will be to implement similar approaches in their own classrooms, allowing enhanced student learning.

Management Training. Knowing what experiential learning looks like is only part of teacher preparation. Implementing it successfully requires management skills such as ensuring shop safety, scheduling greenhouse tasks, and maintaining SAE systems. A project titled *Pre-service Teaching Training* (2014) aimed to give teachers sustainable teaching methods. A key component allowed preservice teachers to student teach in a school that managed a garden (Bluhm, 2013). This experience taught sustainability

Mentorship. Once teachers gain experience with experiential methods, the final step in preparation is mentorship. Research shows that structured mentoring and cohort-based support systems help sustain new teachers by em-

bedding them in professional learning communities, reducing isolation, and providing ongoing feedback (Sanfilippo, 2025). In agricultural education, the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE) emphasizes this model through programs like *Teachers Turn the Key* and professional learning cohorts, which connect novice teachers with experienced mentors for problem-solving and reflection. These initiatives demonstrate how mentorship complements curriculum integration and management training by giving teachers a supportive network to navigate challenges within school farms, SAEs, and laboratory instruction. Teacher preparation programs must expand mentorship exposure, alongside coursework and

management training, to aid prepared educators that will support the next generation.

Mr. Montgomery's experience at the beginning of this essay illustrates the challenge too many new agricultural educators face—passionate about teaching but underprepared to apply the methods that define agricultural education. Without proper preparation in curriculum integration, management, and mentorship, even the most motivated teachers can find themselves with empty greenhouses, unused shop tools, and students hesitant to apply what they have learned. This outcome does not reflect a lack of effort but rather a gap in teacher preparation. By expanding opportunities for preservice teachers to experience experiential learning, practice management of real-world systems like SAEs and school farms, and engage in mentorship networks such as those supported by NAAE, colleges can ensure that new educators enter the classroom confident and capable. Ultimately, these improvements are not just about helping teachers feel prepared—they are about preparing students to thrive. When teachers are fully equipped to guide experiential learning, students gain the skills, confidence, and problem-solving abilities needed to become the next generation of agriculturalists. In this way, improving teacher preparation is not only an investment in educators but also in the future of agriculture itself.

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