

Blurred Lines: Exploring how SBAE Teachers Interact with Workplace Boundaries

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### Introduction

The challenges associated with the work of secondary school-based agriculture education (SBAE) teachers has long been a subject of concern in the agricultural education community (Mundt & Connors, 1999; Stair, et al., 2012), particularly in relation to agriculture teacher retention (Lemons, et al., 2015; Solomonson, et al., 2018; Sorensen, et al., 2016). Recent research specifically illuminates the ability to establish and maintain boundaries as a potential factor in the retention conversation (Hasselquist & Graves, 2019). Hasselquist and Graves (2019) identified setting boundaries as a key skill for mid-career CTE teachers in staying in the profession long term. In Traini, et al. (2019), early-career SBAE teachers expressed feelings of guilt and tension when trying say ‘no’ to various activities which interfered with their endeavors toward work-life balance.

Despite a mounting base of literature, little is known regarding SBAE teachers’ engagement with boundary creation and boundary encounters. Our research is important as greater clarity in identifying boundaries allows those charged with teachers’ welfare greater intention in their efforts toward teacher well-being. The purpose of this study was to explore how SBAE teachers interact with boundaries in their professional lives. Specifically, our research question is, *under what circumstances do SBAE teachers feel their boundaries are being crossed?* This aligns with AAAE research priority area three, questions two and six (Roberts, et al., 2016).

### Conceptual Framework

We employed concepts from Cloud and Townsend (2017) focusing on practical strategies for professionals to identify and manage boundary creation in the workplace. Cloud and Townsend (2017) postulate boundaries as physical and emotional delineations which help people understand their responsibilities. Examples include statements such as, “I will not bring work home with me,” “I will not check email on the weekends,” or “I have the right to think about a request for 24 hours before I give a response.” Cloud and Townsend (2017) argue establishing and maintaining clear boundaries in vocation gives a clearer picture of what people are/are not responsible for, and results in enhanced quality of life. We operationalized these concepts in relation to the work of SBAE teachers to think about how they interact with boundaries in their professional lives. Given the numerous demands and duties on SBAE teachers, and emerging research linking the idea of boundaries to the teacher retention conversation, we argue Cloud and Townsend’s (2017) notion offers a useful lens for examining how SBAE teachers experience crossed-boundaries.

### Methodology

This descriptive qualitative investigation collected data from two workshops, during the 2018-2019 academic year ( $n = 66$ ), focused on establishing and maintaining boundaries. One focused on early-career SBAE teachers ( $n = 52$ ) and the other offered professional development for all SBAE teachers in Oregon ( $n = 14$ ). Descriptive qualitative research allowed us to answer a question especially relevant to our practice while employing eclectic methodological tools (Sandelowski, 2000). Data collection began as participants anonymously wrote examples of when they felt emotions associated with crossed-boundaries at work: *overlooked/smothered*, *annoyed/resentful*, *guilt/shame*, and *disrespected/unappreciated* (Cloud & Townsend, 2017). We followed this with a whole-group discussion during which we took field notes to capture additional insights from participants. We reviewed the field notes and 96 individual excerpts

from participants through initial reading, open coding, and memoing. Subsequently, the data were analyzed by "... [organizing] repeating ideas into larger groups that express a common theme" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 61). To ensure our findings were credible and trustworthy, we engaged in collaborative data analysis and offer illustrative quotes to ground our claims (Maxwell, 2012).

### Findings

Data analysis yielded three themes as participants shared crossed-boundaries: *perceived expectations*, *personal time impeded*, and *commitment from others*. These themes largely associated emotions of *guilt/shame* with *annoyed/resentful* and *disrespected/underappreciated* as secondary emotions. Feelings of being *overlooked/smothered* dispersed more evenly across the identified boundaries while the other emotional associations were concentrated at the three themes most heavily addressed. Examples of *perceived expectations* included, "when ASB comes to me and expects to use the shop...or for me to drop what I'm doing to help them," and "when alumni/parents assume things are or are not happening but don't ask an advisor and they get mad at us." Within this theme, other ideas regarding workload, deadlines, logistics, and recognition also emerged. *Impediments on personal time* were offered as, "when I miss baby bedtime, dinner, first steps, or potty training," and "I had to miss a huge 20+ year family tradition for a mandatory work trip and hated the guilt." Ideas encapsulated within this theme encompassed physical space and mental health. Finally, *commitment from others* (including parents, resources, and others' perceptions) comprised statements such as, "when community members do not volunteer or attend an event, banquet, and then ask me to call if I need anything from them," and "when students come up with an idea for fundraising and assume I will do it/agree to it or run it for them."

### Conclusions and Implications

Results from our study reveal participants feel crossed-boundaries most poignantly when perceived expectations are imposed, when their personal time is impeded due to various work-related obligations, and when various individuals (e.g., parents, students, administration) expect unreciprocated commitment. It appears our participants interact with blurred boundaries or a lack of defined limits or bounds in their chosen vocation. These results align with findings from previous research offering the challenges associated with the multiple demands of the job (Lemons, et al., 2015; Solomonson, et al., 2018) and Cloud and Townsend's (2017) connections between blurred boundaries and diminished well-being. This extends the research of Hasselquist & Graves (2019) toward greater clarity in boundaries as a component of retention.

Our investigation has implications for further research, teacher preparation, and SBAE teachers. Additional research is needed to further understand the crossed-boundaries teachers identify. More specifically, how agriculture teachers establish and maintain boundaries in relation to expectations, time at work, and garnering support from collaborators. Continued clarity around boundaries aids in preemptive measures to navigate boundary crossing. These measures assist those who prepare teachers in offering strategies and support to set boundaries early, recognize when crossed-boundaries occur, and provide language to reclaim healthy boundaries. Finally, promoting continued awareness of boundaries and effective boundary-setting strategies enhances supporting in-career teachers at all stages (Hasselquist & Graves, 2019). This support is vital to maintaining longevity and mental health in the SBAE teacher workforce.

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