

**Building Comradery Between Preservice and In-Service Teachers**

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## Introduction/Theoretical Framework

Connectivity and sense of community among school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers impacts self-efficacy and longevity in the career (Moser & McKim, 2020). Many times, school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers are isolated as the only SBAE teacher at their school (Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Education, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were further isolated due to distance learning and physical distance requirements (Parte & Herrador-Alcaide, 2021). It is crucial for SBAE teachers to connect because research shows isolation and the lack of professional network in early career teachers can lead to teacher turnover, while collaboration empowers teachers to stay (DeLay & Washburn, 2013).

Connectivity among SBAE teachers is a significant predictor of career commitment and lack of connectivity for some teachers may be a cause of the nationwide shortage of SBAE teachers (Moser & McKim, 2020). With the continual need for highly qualified teachers (Kantrovich, 2010), it is essential for SBAE teachers to connect and build relationships with others in the profession. Further, gratitude serves an important role in increasing a person's emotional and social wellbeing (Howells & Cumming, 2012).

Interactions with SBAE teachers through the spring and summer of 2020 indicated many teachers felt lost and overwhelmed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers expressed feelings of low morale during personal visits, in-service workshops, conventions, and other virtual and in-person events. At the beginning of the Fall 2020 semester, faculty and teaching assistants for the AGED 3103: *Foundations and Philosophies of Agricultural Education* course at Oklahoma State University realized an opportunity to connect with in-service teachers in Oklahoma by writing thank you notes after hearing unsettling stories from teachers throughout the state.

## How it Works

The thank you note writing activity served two purposes: (a) To increase communication between preservice and in-service agricultural education teachers, and (b) To increase morale among SBAE teachers. Preservice teachers enrolled in AGED 3103 authored handwritten thank you cards to in-service teachers to recognize their commitment to SBAE through the COVID-19 pandemic and to thank them for their dedication to the profession. Preservice teachers were encouraged to be creative in writing their unique message to the in-service teachers, while also expressing their interest in joining them in the profession in the coming years.

Each week, preservice teachers wrote thank you cards to two or three SBAE teachers at the beginning of their lab section. We used the Oklahoma SBAE teacher directory for in-service teachers' contact information and to ensure students wrote a thank you card to every SBAE teacher in the state (Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Education, 2021). The Student Success Center in the Ferguson College of Agriculture was gracious to donate stationary (cards and envelopes) featuring the college logo. The activity afforded preservice teachers the opportunity to learn names and school locations of SBAE teachers they might not have previously known as they wrote their notes. The notes were sent out using the departmental mailing service.

### Results to Date

The thank you notes achieved the goal of creating connections between the 44 preservice teachers in AGED 3103 and 475 in-service teachers, while also increasing morale among both groups. After notes were sent to teachers, faculty received follow-up emails, phone calls, and thank you cards from SBAE teachers expressing their appreciation for the notes. One in-service teacher wrote:

Thank you for the letter. It's nice to know that the future has thoughtful young people like yourself. That will serve you well in the future I hope that this letter shows that your small act of kindness made this ag teacher's day and was just the thing he needed. If you ever need help or advice in the profession, feel free to contact me anytime.

Feedback shared by students in AGED 3013 to lab instructors was universally positive. The preservice teachers felt included in the network of SBAE teachers. Some even stated the activity encouraged them to continue their degree program to become SBAE teachers. In-service teachers were inspired by the gesture, and some shared a renewed sense of excitement in their role. Many teachers offered to assist the preservice teachers in their future endeavors in the agricultural education field.

At the end of the semester, we reached out to in-service teachers to submit video messages of encouragement and advice to be shared with the preservice teachers during their final class of the course. This *full circle* activity provided a form of two-way communication and served as an opportunity to increase morale and connectivity between preservice and in-service teachers.

### Future Plans/Advice to Others

This activity is a simple project that can be replicated at other institutions. It takes little time and can be done as students wait for class sessions begin. Faculty and teaching assistants at OSU will continue using this model to create relationships and encourage in-service teachers. In the future, preservice teachers could choose to include their personal contact information allowing for more direct communication between the preservice and in-service teachers after the initial notes are sent.

An unanticipated benefit was this activity demonstrated the importance of sending properly written thank you notes to stakeholders. It also served as an opportunity to teach students how to properly address an envelope.

### Costs/Resources Needed

Preservice teachers were a key resource to this project as they wrote the thank you notes. Additional resources included stationary provided by the Ferguson College of Agriculture (approximate value of \$180), the agricultural educator teacher directory provided by Oklahoma Agricultural Education Teachers Association (OAETA), and postage, which was approximately \$185.

## References

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