

**Building Professional Collaboration and Identity Through  
Pre-service Agricultural Education Teacher Professional Development**

Trent Wells  
Southern Arkansas University  
Department of Agriculture  
Agriculture (AGR) 208  
Magnolia, AR 71753  
ktwells@saumag.edu

Christopher M. Estep  
University of Arkansas  
1120 W. Maple  
AFLS E111  
Fayetteville, AR 72701  
estep@uark.edu

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### **Introduction**

To be considered effective, school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers must possess a wide range of traits, including knowledge of agricultural subject matter, active planning of instruction, and professional engagement (Eck et al., 2019). Professional engagement activities, such as attending annual teacher conferences and participating in specialized professional development (PD) events, are vital to the development of competent SBAE teachers, as they help fill gaps in teachers' knowledge and skills (Phipps et al., 2008). However, to maximize the positive impacts of PD on teachers, programming should be conducted intentionally and proactively (Wells & Hainline, 2021).

Teachers' engagement in PD can impact their professional identity. According to Shoulders and Myers (2011), professional identity refers to SBAE teachers' perceptions of themselves as teachers and their place in the larger context of the profession. Shoulders and Myers (2011) noted that several factors influence SBAE teachers' professional identity development, including gender, the nature of the agricultural education profession, instructional practices, and societal expectations. Moreover, they suggested that agricultural teacher education programs can be especially influential in developing teachers' professional identity. Because of the social nature of professional identity development (Shoulders & Myers, 2011), self-segregation can occur as a social support mechanism among people with similar backgrounds, interests, and ideas (Moore-Jones, 2022). But, such practices can cause division and may hinder the "spirit of unity among classroom teachers" ascribed to by the National Association of Agricultural Educators ([NAAE] 2022, Our Mission section, ¶ 1).

With this in mind, there are currently four active agricultural teacher education programs in Arkansas. Historically, interactions between the programs and their respective faculty have been professionally cooperative; yet, student recruitment efforts between the four programs have tended to be quite competitive, particularly in recent years. Anecdotally, this competitive atmosphere between the four programs has helped foster university-related divisions among the SBAE teachers in Arkansas. Consequently, teachers have tended to gravitate toward engaging more frequently with their fellow university alumni versus with colleagues who graduated from other universities (i.e., self-segregation). To overcome barriers related to self-segregation based on agricultural teacher education program and positively impact the professional identity development of pre-service SBAE teachers, perhaps providing highly-collaborative PD for pre-service teachers might be a useful approach. Such programming could intentionally and proactively build a mindset of professional unity and cohesiveness, regardless of the agricultural teacher education program attended.

### **How it Works**

The Arkansas Pre-service Teacher Conference was created to bring together pre-service teachers from each of the four agricultural teacher education programs for PD. Workshop sessions were designed to maximize involvement and collaboration among participants in order

to facilitate professional identity growth among the group. Workshop topics pertained to classroom management, working with community members, using social media to promote the complete SBAE program, Arkansas reporting requirements, professionalism, and using resources provided by the National FFA Organization. Additionally, joint experiences outside of the workshop sessions, such as meals and free time, were intended to foster relationship-building among the pre-service teachers.

### **Results to Date**

In January 2022, state staff with the Arkansas Department of Education hosted the inaugural Arkansas Pre-service Teacher Conference, which was an intensive, two-day PD event designed for pre-service teachers completing their student teaching experience during either the Spring 2022 semester or the Fall 2022 semester. The event was held at Camp Couchdale, a centrally-located campground owned by the Arkansas FFA Association. Participants checked-in to the event mid-morning of the first day and ate lunch together.

Workshops were conducted throughout the first afternoon, followed by dinner. The participants were given free time after dinner and were encouraged to socialize and visit with each other. Several pre-service teachers from various universities used the free time to leave camp together and travel into the surrounding town. Breakfast was provided to participants on the second morning, which was followed by workshops both before and after lunch. The event ended in the late afternoon of the second day. This was the first year to host this event; however, anecdotal evidence provided by conversations with pre-service teachers was the event helped them develop relationships with future colleagues from other universities. Many of the pre-service teachers exchanged contact information and planned to contact each other during their student teaching experience for advice or help.

### **Future Plans and Advice to Others**

The state staff at the Arkansas Department of Education plan to continue this event in the future. We recommend that in the future, planners seek out more sponsors (e.g., Arkansas Farm Bureau, Arkansas Cattlemen's Association, etc.) to help lower the overall cost of the program's delivery. Involving additional sponsors and inviting them to the event could help introduce the pre-service teachers and sponsors to each other, thereby fostering additional opportunities for relationship-building. We found this event to be a useful, practical approach to collaboration and professional identity-building between pre-service teachers from different universities. We recommend that other states consider adopting a similar approach if they do not currently do so.

### **Costs / Resources Needed**

Pre-service teachers attended this PD event at no cost beyond their travel to and from the venue. The primary costs for event organizers were meals, workshop supplies, and giveaways, which equated to about \$1,300.00 total. A curriculum company sponsored one of the meals. Because the Arkansas FFA Association owned the campground, lodging and workshop space were available at reduced cost. The cost to host this type of PD event will vary depending upon available resources.

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