

Fostering Community: A Preservice Teacher Retreat

Kayla L. Paglia
North Carolina State University

Clay Beasley
North Carolina State University

Travis D. Park
North Carolina State University

Misty D. Lambert
North Carolina State University

Mary Kate Morgan Lanier
North Carolina State University

Josh Bledsoe
North Carolina FFA State Advisor

Stephen Edwards
University of Mount Olive

Joy E. Morgan
North Carolina State University

Wendy J. Warner
North Carolina State University

Kayla L. Paglia
1 Lampe Dr.
Raleigh, NC 27607
(805)325-3904
klpaglia@ncsu.edu

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Introduction

Effective agriculture teachers can be assessed based on “instruction, FFA, SAE, building community partnerships, marketing, professional growth/professionalism, program planning, and personal qualities” (Roberts & Dyer, 2004, p. 93). Active agricultural educators execute these items, but how do teachers learn these skills? Potential factors include past experience, professional development, and a positive student teaching experience. According to Figland et al. (2019), the professional development needs of agricultural educators vary based on years of experience breaking it down into 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, and 16+ years of experience. Furthermore, there is a lack of information regarding preservice teachers' needs before stepping into the role of agricultural educator.

What role does a community of practice play in developing preservice agricultural educators? De Lay and Washburn (2013) examined the idea of community and connections with other agricultural educators finding preservice teachers sought to make friends at this level to become collaborative partners within their field. These collaborations positively impacted teachers' “career development, satisfaction, and commitment” (p. 115). Professional community-based practices in schools are not guaranteed by the school itself, but rather by those willing to share their knowledge with other teachers and build a sense of collaboration (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003).

The Teach Ag Retreat in North Carolina was created in 2022 using State Teach Ag Results (STAR) grant funds. During the STAR grant call, an undergraduate student on the team offered the idea of the retreat after acknowledging that students did not know other students from different grade levels in their departments, let alone across the four North Carolina institutions that prepare agricultural educators. Following COVID-19, it was apparent that preservice teachers lacked a sense of community among their peers of future agricultural educators. Amongst North Carolina teacher preparation programs, a need was discussed to create a preservice weekend retreat that would serve to foster community, collaboration, and connections across all four institutions and within their departments.

How it Works

The Teach Ag Retreat has been held in spring 2023, fall 2023, and fall 2024. This is an annual weekend-long conference specifically for any preservice agricultural education student enrolled in one of the four institutions in North Carolina. Registration occurs through a Google form with the link shared with each institution's teacher educators to advertise and recruit. The retreat is held at the North Carolina FFA center, where students are housed on campus and partake in team building and professional development activities throughout the weekend (Friday evening through Sunday morning). The connections that begin at this conference can last a lifetime for those who teach in North Carolina and allow for diverse opportunities for collaboration across the state that otherwise would not occur. Activities are planned by grant team members to facilitate conversations and foster friendships among students and their peers with the hope of building connections within their departments across grade levels and institutions. Activities have varied from year to year depending on the demand from students and input from the STAR grant team. Some activities have included “finding your why”, leadership

games, a tour of the facilities and history, service components, professional round tables, and technical workshops (Mechanics, Horticulture, Poultry). One of the most anticipated activities is the “Banner Battle” where students are split into teams that blend students from all institutions and they compete in a variety of camp activities to promote collaboration, teamwork, and a sense of competition among the participants.

Example Agenda:

- Friday evening: welcome, athletic/game competition, icebreakers
- Saturday: leadership games, reflections, finding your “Why”, FFA history, technical workshops, service activities, free time
- Sunday morning: reflections, wrap-up, cleanup, awards

Results to date

This event has been successful in providing preservice students a space to build their network with other future agricultural educators and state agricultural education staff. Without this retreat, students would have minimal opportunities to interact with students outside of their institution or grade level. In the inaugural year, the conference was planned for October but was postponed from fall 2022 to spring 2023 due to a hurricane. The first year had 54 students registered for the postponed conference and 37 students for the rescheduled event. In the fall of 2023, there was an increase to 61 registrations, and in the fall of 2024, the highest number was recorded at 67 registrations. This event is anticipated to continue growing and has a meaningful impact on students as they move from preservice to student teaching and beyond.

Future Plans and Advice to Others

This idea would not have come to fruition without an undergraduate member of the STAR team. We recommend involving student representation in team planning especially for events focused on retention of teacher candidates. We plan to continue the program, and, moving forward, there may be an opportunity to have some or all of the costs associated with this event covered by sponsors interested in improving the agricultural education field. These same sponsors could administer professional development for their organization or company needs. This collaboration would also foster connections between preservice teachers and the industry partners present. Also, all institutions will place an increased emphasis on recruiting for the retreat. We recommend other states adopt a similar program that combines relevant professional development with community-strengthening activities.

Costs and Resources Needed

Those who attended this event did so free of charge. Food for participants was the largest expense, followed by the t-shirts provided to participants. In addition, there was a fee for the cleaning of the facility following the event. The cost of conducting the on-site professional development workshops was minimal as many of the materials needed were donated from various sources. The total cost of the conference in 2024 was \$3,700 or \$56 per registered participant for the weekend. This was funded using STAR grant funds. Workshop consumables came from a family-owned hardware store and the tools and equipment were provided by a teaching shop at one of the institutions. These expenses may vary depending on the number of participants and the topic of the professional development event offered.

References

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