

**Feeling the Weight of the Plate: A Buffet of Opportunities and Responsibilities for SBAE Teachers**

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### Introduction/Need for Innovation or Idea

If the metaphorical “plate” school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers reference was real, it would need to be large and heavily reinforced. Teachers in school-based agricultural education (SBAE) seek success for themselves, their programs, and their students by navigating a growing list of responsibilities, expectations, and opportunities (Best et al., 2025a, 2025b; Clemons et al., 2021; Traini et al., 2019). However, perceptions of demanding workloads often contribute to work-life strains that may lead teachers to leave the profession (Igo & Perry, 2019; Queen et al., 2025; Solomonson & Retallick, 2018; Solomonson et al., 2022; Sorensen et al., 2016). To help pre-service teachers visualize and reflect on the expanding scope of their professional responsibilities, the *Buffet of Opportunities and Responsibilities* lesson was developed. This experiential learning activity invites reflection on the embodied experience of balancing professional commitments.

### How It Works/Lesson Components

The *Buffet of Opportunities and Responsibilities* lesson engages pre-service SBAE teachers in an experiential activity designed to make professional workload concrete and tangible. Facilitators prepare a “buffet” of play food items labeled with responsibilities associated with SBAE teaching. Pre-service teachers visit the “buffet” and select items they imagine taking on during a semester of practice, placing the items on a paper plate to represent their professional commitments. After selecting items at the “buffet,” participants engage in a guided, written reflection encouraging exploration of embodied feelings throughout the experience and factors which influenced which items they chose to include on their plates.

While individuals rotate through the buffet activity, peers simultaneously engage in boundary-setting work using the *Donut Model for Agriculture Teacher Success* (McKim et al., 2024), identifying upper and lower limits across six domains of professional and personal life. This parallel activity encourages pre-service teachers to consider both the accumulation of responsibilities and the limits necessary to sustain their practice. The lesson concludes with facilitated group discussion in which participants collaboratively interpret the experience, connect the metaphorical “plate” to anticipated professional practice, and consider strategies for navigating opportunities and responsibilities within SBAE teaching contexts.

### Results to Date/Implications

The *Buffet of Opportunities and Responsibilities* lesson was first facilitated with pre-service teachers in Fall 2024. After minor revisions, the updated lesson has been facilitated with three additional groups of pre-service teachers, including groups at two additional universities, resulting in a total of 37 pre-service teachers engaged in the lesson.

As facilitators, we notice pre-service teachers engaging deeply with the lesson. Some pre-service teachers are observed to quickly add to their plates, then choose with more deliberation as their plates fill. Others carefully inspect each item, occasionally asking if the hot dog (e.g., hosting a community service event) needs to be added alongside its bun (e.g., planning the

event). Pre-service teachers are also observed to find creative ways to bring more “food” to their tables. One pre-service teacher carried her plate cradled in her arms while another carried the plate in one hand and additional food items in another. These actions provided abundant topics for discussion regarding how SBAE teachers may feel the desire to add more work-related tasks than they can comfortably carry.

Further, some pre-service teachers have been observed to drop food items from their plates to the floor. On most occasions, the pre-service teacher picks up the item and returns it to their plate, often with an accompanying sheepish smile. On another occasion, we observed a peer pick up the item and return it to the pre-service teacher’s plate. In the moment, the plate-holding pre-service teacher thanked the peer and continued with the activity. However, in reflection, the pre-service teacher commented that they wish the item could have just been left on the floor! Moments such as these provide opportunities to engage pre-service teachers in reflection and group discussions about how SBAE teachers juggle tasks which fall off their metaphorical plates and the role of peers and other stakeholders in adding tasks to the SBAE teacher workload.

The *Buffet of Opportunities and Responsibilities* lesson creates meaningful engagement and reflection from pre-service teachers during the lesson. As a part of a class debrief, students acknowledged how different plates could look, validated each other’s selections, and participated in normalizing different priorities based on where individuals were hoping to teach. But there is also evidence to suggest the impact is also long-lasting. One pre-service teacher shared, “This lesson has continued to stick with me and my peers even months after experiencing it. ...I have participated in few lessons as engaging and impactful as this one.”

### **Future Plans/Advice to Others**

While we have thus far engaged only pre-service teachers in the *Buffet of Opportunities and Responsibilities* lesson, there is great opportunity to adapt this lesson for facilitation with in-service teachers. However, the amount of play food items may be a limiting factor for facilitating this lesson with a large group. To provide a buffet of options mimicking the realities of abundant responsibilities and opportunities available for SBAE teachers to select from, a 135-piece play food set accommodates one individual at a time.

We are also currently working on creating a second component to this lesson in which pre-service teachers reconceptualize the selection of SBAE teacher tasks from a “buffet” to a “menu.” With this addition, we seek to support pre-service teachers in keeping the core outcomes of SBAE as the foundation for decision-making and SBAE teacher task-selection.

### **Resources Needed**

The *Buffet of Opportunities and Responsibilities* lesson requires the purchase of play-food items. We selected a 135-piece, plastic pantry items set with a variety of food groups and food items represented. After purchasing, each piece should be labeled with a task associated with the role of SBAE teacher. All other materials are linked in the lesson plan, which can be accessed at <https://tinyurl.com/4asw56dn>.

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