

Southern Region AAAE

Distinguished Lecturer Address

I am honored to have been asked to speak to you today. When I look at the list of those who have preceded me in this role, I am even more honored. I have to admit that I was surprised when James called me and asked me to be the Distinguished Lecturer this year. When I considered what I should say to my friends and colleagues gathered here, I decided that I should speak from my heart. Since I am speaking from the heart, I think it is only fair that I begin with a confession. I want to make this confession before all of you. I have been having an affair. I have been having this love affair for over 30 years, and yes, you all know what it is – it's this profession we call agricultural education. And I am thankful that I have had a supportive family, a loving wife and dedicated colleagues who have allowed me to continue this affair through all those years. I finally have an opportunity to talk about this affair before all of you.

Just so that everyone understands what I mean by agricultural education, I want to give you my definition. When I talk about agricultural education, I intend to include all of us who prepare people to provide information about agriculture to others – whether it be in a formal school setting, an extension setting, in the agricultural industry, or to the general public. When I talk about agricultural education, it is my intention to include all of what we do in our departments that serves to communicate information about agriculture in this country and around the world. I am pleased that the profession has broadened its scope to include our colleagues who are involved in extension programs, agricultural

communications, and agricultural leadership. It is important that we maintain that identity, but the identity should include all of us working in agricultural education. Each component of agricultural education within our departments may have a slightly different clientele group, but we are all focused on careers that involve communication of information and providing leadership for this great industry of agriculture.

I was once told that every speech had to have 3 points, so I began thinking about series of threes that I could use as a basis of my address. Since this is an education-focused group, I thought I might go back to the basics and center my remarks around the 3 R's. But I am not going to talk about how we may integrate Reading, Riting, and Rithmetic into the agricultural education curriculum. The three R's I have chosen are Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships. For us, as agricultural educators, these seem to be the three R's of primary importance. I hope that I can convey in these few minutes how I feel we have addressed the 3 R's in agricultural education programs and perhaps offer a challenge for us in the future.

When I consider the first R of rigor, I believe that this is the only place to start. Without rigor in our programs, we become weak, ineffective, and eventually we cease to exist. I am proud of the many ways that we have exhibited rigor in our programs in the past. As a result of that rigor, I believe that graduates of our programs are better prepared to enter careers in their chosen profession than are most graduates of our universities. Our academic programs will challenge students to think in different ways and to consider different ideas than they have in the past. I am proud to be a part of a profession that understands that knowledge is gained, not for knowledge's sake, but to use that information to solve the

problems facing a complex industry and a complex society. This is a profession that does not see memorization of facts as the ultimate goal, but instead seeks to teach people how to pull those facts together in a meaningful way to create and evaluate new knowledge that improves the lives of the people that we serve. We have not taken the easy approach to teaching. Instead, we have chosen the more rigorous approach, but one that is ultimately more beneficial. Our programs must have rigor. We must continue to insist on programs that provide excellent preparation for our students for the careers in which they enter. We have to be recognized as providing the BEST teachers, the BEST extension professionals, the BEST communicators, and the BEST leaders, not just in agriculture, but in any segment of society. I believe that we are ready to do this. But there is a challenge facing us now – and that challenge will probably continue into the near future. We have not prepared enough doctoral graduates of our programs to fill the positions that are available in our profession. The AAAE web site currently lists 26 open positions, and when it is updated the number will be over 30. The same web site shows approximately 10 doctoral students who are seeking faculty positions. But even if the number of students were 30, there would be a reason for concern. We need to be able to select the best from the candidates that are available and not just be in the position of scrambling to find one candidate we can hire. While we need to increase the number of graduate students in our programs to meet the increased demand for faculty positions, we cannot afford to do so by lowering our standards or by decreasing the rigor of our programs. Instead, we have to convince the best and the brightest in our professions to consider careers as university faculty in agricultural education.

Rigor is something that must be present in our scholarship. In the area of agricultural education research, I have always been proud of the quality of the research we produce when I compare it with some of our other educational colleagues. That level of excellence that we see in our research did not come about easily. For some of us, it was a painful process – a process in which we met as a profession to present our research and then hear the critiques of our colleagues. I recall going to my first Central States Research Conference in Chicago as a graduate student. Papers were presented at the conference, and not one, but three discussants followed with constructive criticism. While that process was somewhat painful, the result was that our research methodology improved. We learned as a result of the rigorous expectations and demands of our own profession. Whatever the form of scholarship, it is critical that the quality of what we do is evident. We no longer engage in those painful critiques of our research at our research conferences. Perhaps they served their purpose and are no longer necessary. I am glad that we have chosen to discuss our research and the implications of the research to our profession at our regional and national conferences. I believe this offers us a great opportunity to gain from the work of others in our field. But I have to admit that I have seen what I believe to be an increasing number of methodology errors in our research in recent years. Our challenge in the future will be to maintain the quality and rigor of our research, because we have no place for sloppiness, and at the same time continue to spend time discussing how we can use the information it provides for us.

The second R that I want us to consider is Relevance. If you go back to our roots, most of the success that agricultural education has experienced is because of the relevance of our programs. Certainly, high school agriculture programs were developed based upon

community needs. The growth of Cooperative Extension in its early years and its very existence today is due to the relevance of the educational programs they provide.

Agricultural communicators do not stay in business long unless they provide a relevant service to the agricultural industry. And the more recent development of agricultural leadership programs was a response to a demand for a new generation of leaders for this important industry of agriculture. Agricultural education is relevant because it makes a difference. I am proud of the relevance of our programs throughout our history. We have relied not only on the expertise of professionals in agricultural education, but perhaps more importantly on the expertise of citizens' advisory committees that guided the program development and insured the relevance of the program to the community. The point is that we are not relevant because we say so, but because others believe that we are relevant.

Relevance, however, is not something that is easily maintained in a dynamic and ever-changing world. What was relevant yesterday and has served us well in the past may or may not be relevant in today's world. Agricultural education has been a leader in the transformation of the agricultural industry into the mechanical age of agriculture and later into the Green Revolution. We have led the way through the agricultural chemical revolution, serving as genuine and important change agents in the adoption of the use of agricultural chemicals and fertilizers – and more recently, addressing the environmental concerns resulting from that use. But I question whether we have embraced the next agricultural revolution, the biotechnology age? Are we doing more than giving lip service to biotechnology as an important part of agriculture? Are we preparing our students to provide information about the complex fields of genomics and biotechnology in the agricultural

industry? Are we providing effective leadership and effective communication in dealing with the social and ethical concerns posed by scientific advances in this still-emerging field? Or is our curriculum still more concerned with Mendel's peas than with recombinant DNA? In another area of critical importance, we all recognize that the agricultural economy is global in nature. But do our graduates spend more time teaching producers how to increase their production efficiency by a bushel per acre or a few extra pounds gained than we teach them how to analyze the markets in Asia, in South America and in Europe and the potential impact on our own agricultural economy? A challenge for us in the future is to prepare professionals that will have the skills that are relevant in tomorrow's agriculture. Our programs will need to reflect the biotechnology age and global agriculture more than the mechanical age of agriculture and the Green Revolution.

Relevance is not just a concern in the educational programs that we provide. Another area where relevance is critical is in the area of research. I believe that much of the progress that we have made in agricultural education is due to relevant research that has been conducted in the past. Whether it has been improved instructional methodology, SAE programs, youth leadership, adoption of innovations, retention of personnel, program improvement research, or other topics – the list could go on and on, we are a stronger profession because of the research that we have conducted in the past. The problems were relevant because they impacted the clientele we served. At the risk of adding a 4th R to my speech, I would suggest that our research has been responsive to the needs of our audiences. It seems that we have always struggled with the idea that we must develop a narrowly focused research theme and that all of our research must fit within our thematic research

agenda. If we think of a research agenda as narrowly focused, this provides us with a real dilemma. The reality of the situation is that agricultural education faces a wide variety of questions and problems that demand our attention as researchers. We have attempted to address the concerns and find answers to the problems facing the profession with a relatively small number of researchers nationally. In order for our programs to remain relevant to our states we often tend to address state or regional issues with our research. This sometimes makes it difficult to maintain a narrow theme of research. If we had the same number of researchers in agricultural education as some of our other agricultural departments, we might have an opportunity to more narrowly focus our research efforts. But we simply do not have that luxury. I applaud those who have been able to focus on a relatively narrow body of research in order to delve more deeply into those problem areas. But I am also ready to defend those who have interrupted their thematic research or changed to a different area of research in order to address the questions that are relevant to their states.

This is where I will run the risk of offending someone in the audience. It is not my intention to get into a debate over what topics are relevant for agricultural educators to study. I hope to only give us some thoughts to consider. I fully understand the pressure on university faculty to produce research-based articles for our most prestigious refereed journals. I also understand the increasing pressure on faculty to secure external funding for research activities at your universities. But it seems to me that in recent years we tend to conduct more studies on problems that seem to be in the periphery of our field rather than our central problem areas. Perhaps we have answered all of the relevant questions related to agricultural education programs in public schools, to programs delivered as an extension of

the university, to communication issues in the agricultural industry and to agricultural leadership. But I doubt that this is the case. I am concerned that in some cases we are researching the easy to research topics rather than the most relevant problems to our profession. With the limited resources we have for research, it is not difficult to come to the conclusion that we need to spend our time on the most relevant problems. I have to admit, that I have always been a little skeptical when our profession discusses the need to establish a research agenda, because I automatically think of a narrow focus on topics that may not necessarily fit my interests. But that is not the way to look at a research agenda for agricultural education. I look forward to our profession actively establishing a research agenda – not a narrowly focused agenda, but one that encompasses all of the major problems that face the profession in each of the areas in which we work. The National Council is leading that effort. Our profession must take the leadership in identifying the most important topics to be addressed by our research. Our professional journals can assist in that agenda by giving priority to manuscripts that focus on the identified research agenda. A radical idea? Perhaps. But if we want the profession to focus on certain topics, one way to do this is to some way favor the topics that we say are the most important to the profession.

The third and final R to consider is Relationships. I believe this will be an even more important area for our profession in the future than it has in the past. We are a profession that is made up of small departments or small units within departments scattered across this country. One of the things that I have enjoyed the most about my career is the personal relationships that I have had the opportunity to develop with colleagues around the country. The technology that we have available to us today and that we will have in the future

provides us with opportunities that we have never had before to establish professional relationships and collaborative efforts in teaching, research, and extension/outreach programs. We have had what I would call limited success in establishing relationships between departments and faculty to conduct research activities. Perhaps in the past it was not feasible or, at the best, difficult to develop true collaborations among departments, but we no longer have that excuse. We can and must work together more effectively than we have in the past. Limited resources demand that every department not duplicate the efforts of every other department in the country, especially in the areas of teaching at a distance and extension programs. The world is moving to obtaining information from a distance and the most efficient way to provide that information is from cooperative relationships, not through competition. It will be difficult for some of our departments to compete in this arena of distance education. We cannot afford to have some agricultural education programs left behind because they do not have the resources to develop strong on-campus and distance education programs. Instead, I propose that we join forces and develop relationships with other departments to provide stronger, more rigorous and relevant programs and sources of information. We are already seeing some of this with E-Extension initiatives using strong relationships within regions of our country to provide the best extension materials possible to the general public.

I plan to continue this love affair with agricultural education for several more years. During those years, I look forward to great things happening in our profession. I am convinced that we will continue our best traditions of the 3 R's, Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships, and that we will realize an even stronger profession with a greater impact on

the people involved in agriculture as a result. I make this commitment to you to help make this happen. I hope you will join me in this effort. Thank you.