

Walking With Giants

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Abstract

Dr. George W. Wardlow presented the 2013 AAAE Distinguished Lecture at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Agricultural Education in Columbus, Ohio in May, 2013. While the focus of the article is on the importance of research to the profession, it is intended as a philosophical work.

There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown (American Bible Society, 1985, p. 6).

Every culture from the beginning of human civilization has some reference to “giants” of old, or as Genesis refers to them, “men of renown.” The Bible refers to these individuals as Nephilim, a result of human genetic crosses with angels; and we accept the notion that this did not necessarily result in a positive outcome. In Greek mythology the giants who roamed the Earth were, according to the poet Hesiod, the children of Uranus and Gaea (spirits of the sky and the earth) (“Giants (Greek Mythology),” 2013).

Indeed, references are made to “giants” among many cultures of the world. In Native American lore such as Paiute oral history, the Si-Te-Cah or Sai'i are a legendary tribe of red-haired cannibalistic giants (“Giants (Mythology),” 2013). In Norse mythology existed the Jotun, or jötunar in Old Norse (“Jotunn,” 2013). Megalithic construction in South America among Inca and even Aztec legend is, at times, attributed to ancient giants. Who were these men of renown? Who were these “giants?”

Giants in Western Culture

Throughout the historical development of Western culture, the term “giant” has taken on multiple meanings. Earning the designation of “giant” may not be only dependent upon physical stature, but may also be upon deeds. There are modern giants in art and music, literature, technology and innovation, culture and society, and politics.

The 1956 Hollywood movie “Giant,” which brought acclaim to James Dean, Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson, and Rod Taylor, included themes of: inherited wealth, self-made wealth, and the breaking of racial and cultural barriers. (“Giant (movie),” 2013).

Certainly, history is focused on the acts of “giants” which includes examples such as: Martin Luther King, George Washington and Franklin D. Roosevelt; Henry Ford and Alexander Graham Bell; Miles Davis, Jackie Robinson, Rosa Parks and Joan of Arc; Norman Rockwell and

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Georgia O’Keeffe. Each of these were “giants” and “men (and women) of renown.” But who were these men, and women, of renown? What did they do? What did they stand for, that entitles them to the high level of reverence that we pay them?

Ladies and gentlemen, I have walked among giants. Certainly there have been identifiable pillars of the agricultural education profession, the “giants,” the men of renown.” Men who were either directly involved in the development of the agricultural education profession, or men who enabled the development of the profession. These included the likes of: John Dewey, Charles Prosser, and David Snedden, Hoke Smith and Dudley Hughes, and Henry Groseclose, to name a few of the obvious. Others could be listed – Hamlin, Peterson, Phipps – but the point is made.

These pillars of agricultural education represent agricultural education at the high school level. Is that how this profession is defined today? While an important mission, this profession is not limited to providing educational programs for high school teachers. Should the current profession not be considered in terms of the fields into which it has expanded and the research which supports them? If the agricultural education profession has evolved into something larger than it was, then perhaps it is time to openly examine how the profession defines itself today and identify who represents that larger definition.

Giants of Our Time

Leaders in any group are those who have a clear vision for the organization. Leaders can clearly articulate it so that it becomes the collective vision of members of the organization. A shared vision then develops into measurable goals and those goals become plans to be implemented. Leaders then marshal the resources to implement that vision.

Who are the leaders of the agricultural education profession today, the pillars of the profession, and giants of this time? Twenty-five years from now, when one takes a retrospective view of agricultural education as it exists today, who will have been the giants of the profession – a profession of that began with teacher educators in agriculture and that evolved into a community of scholars that includes researchers and educators in a broader field of agricultural education? And then if one narrows the query to examine just the research function, who will be the pillars of agricultural education research? Who are the leaders of a profession that began humbly training high school teachers and then gave rise to and nurtured agricultural leadership and agricultural communications programs, and the research programs which support them?

If you look at the early research in agricultural education, you will see that early leaders relied heavily on research in education which was not necessarily specific to agricultural education – a phenomenon that might well be reconsidered today. To provide some validity for this observation one need only review the reference lists for articles published in *The Journal of Agricultural Education*. Clearly, agricultural education research might profit from using the works of those beyond the profession to provide context and interpretation for research.

Agricultural education did not become a specialized field of research until after World War II. Thus, the period between the beginnings of university agricultural education programs and the 1940s did not include the specialized research in agricultural education found today. That is not to say that there were no leaders in those days, there just were not many researchers specific to the field. As a result, a look at the “pillars of AgEd research” finds a greater proportion of the population after that period. Thus the list of research “giants” within the profession reflects more recent years.

Following is a list of individuals, some of whom may be quite familiar and some of whom may be less so, who may be regarded as more modern “giants” in agricultural education research.

In the early days of research development in the profession, one will find most effort and productivity centered on a few key institutions. These institutions developed PhD programs in agricultural education which ultimately led to the quantity and quality of trained researchers who staff agricultural education programs at other institutions today. So, it should come as little surprise that a list of “pillars of the agricultural education research profession” is dominated by individuals from those institutions. It should also be noted that this is a list belonging to this author, is in no way meant to be exhaustive or all inclusive.

Paul Marvin, who piloted B-29s over the Pacific Ocean during WWII, became department head at the University of Minnesota. Through his leadership, and that of his predecessor, emerged a PhD program and a research program that produced thinkers like Gordon Swanson and George Copa. His unit provided for a wonderful but much under-heralded regular publication called *The Visitor*. *The Visitor* was a published forum for articles of introspection into the profession that existed nowhere else either then or now. Through this publication authors were free to question the “sacred cows” of the profession that David McCracken (1983) later referred to in his 1982 Distinguished Lecture.

The Visitor is particularly noteworthy in itself for the existence of this forum for professional introspection, and it is all the more saddening that it no longer exists. The profession could do well to consider recreating such an avenue to periodically question underlying assumptions and direction.

Gordon Swanson was, to this author’s knowledge, the only member of the profession to serve both as President of the American Vocational Association (now Association for Career and Technical Education) and Phi Delta Kappa. His insights about the need for and function of vocational education and agricultural education became the foundation for much of current philosophy in the profession. A “giant” in both physical stature and professionally, Gordon introduced this author to the philosophical underpinnings of the profession. Well-studied members of the profession in history and philosophy should eventually come to the conclusion that John Dewey “got it right” whereas Charles Prosser and David Snedden, to whom much homage is paid, “got it wrong.” Gordon Swanson “got it right” but one needs to read old issues of the *Phi Delta Kappan* to determine that.

David Williams led the development of the agricultural education program at Iowa State University to becoming a top research and PhD-producing department. His research on individualized, field-based experiential learning laboratories as educational tools was pivotal to understanding the potential of these experiences.

J. Robert Warmbrod, who headed agricultural education at Ohio State University for many years, almost single-handedly established the standards for research that helped agricultural education gain legitimacy in the larger research community. But more than that, for those who ever had a chance to engage him in conversation it soon became clear that his level of perception about the beginnings of the field was unparalleled. Blannie Bowen is a man of character and similar clarity of thought.

John Crunkilton fostered faculty-led research at Virginia Tech University. A prolific writer himself, he understood the need for faculty to engage in scholarship. George Copa, whose background was agricultural education, emerged as a leader and critical thinker in research about the critical place of career and technical education in the public school.

Glen Shinn led a tremendous evolution in the role of the faculty member, and researcher, in agricultural education at Texas A&M University. He oversaw the evolution of a program that in 2013 looks nothing like it did before his tenure there. From him this author learned the value of the philosophy that a good administrator hires good people, empowers them to do their jobs, and then gets out of their way. Jacque Deeds led colleagues to broaden perceptions of professionalism. Gary Leske understood that for a high school program to be successful at the local level it must “fill a unique niche” in the specific local community and school in which it existed. He saw that determining quality in a high school agricultural education program was, in large part, context specific. Each of these people, “giants” in their own right, saw agricultural education and the research that should be done to support it as much larger than maintaining a curriculum in a state of status quo. I have known each of these individuals. I have walked among giants.

Is Current Agricultural Education Research Fostering the Giants of Tomorrow?

What did these individuals do that places them on this list? What types of contributions have made them “giants” in the profession? Agricultural education professionals should be concerned that knowledge of the contributions of these individuals is being lost to the profession. A younger faculty member recently inquired about a line of research that originated with a pivotal individual in the profession. This author believes that when such beginning points exist in lines of research, and they can be clearly identified in the literature base, it is incumbent upon the researcher to recognize that seminal piece of work in the theoretical framework for the study. She shared her concern that she may have a paper rejected if she included references that were older than five years.

Is the review system in agricultural education research such that seminal references are automatically discounted in scholarly works just because of the date of publication? If so, this must be addressed at once, for the profession engages in this type of behavior of essentially ignoring the rich successes of the past then it is doomed to re-investigations of problems that are long-past solved. Scholarship is about building on what the collective “we” know, not about ignoring it. If this is some unwritten rule in the current professional review process, it must have begun with some comment by one of the research methods instructors that was taken out of context. However if it is true as current practice, it seems that we are throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Review the current state of scholarship. Internally within the profession a concern is sometimes voiced that the research is not held in high regard by other researchers or other professions. Members of the agricultural education profession sometimes complain that their research is not eligible to compete for federal research support as an agriculture discipline because “it is really education” and should be supported by education dollars, yet it is not eligible to compete for support for federal education dollars because it is too narrow in scope to have any transferability to larger scholarship and practice in the larger field of education. Agricultural education researchers may complain because their scholarship is not adequately supported by local agricultural experiment station directors, yet the only response is an attempt to educate them to see the world as agricultural educators see it rather than understanding the priority areas that

the director actually funds. Whose fault is this if agricultural education research does not fit into their agenda?

How would one characterize the nature of research within the profession? Is there a propensity to consistently “pick the low hanging fruit” in research and conduct studies that are largely descriptive in nature, and dominated by survey methodology and descriptive statistics? Or is the profession identifying critical problems of practice that recognize and reinforce a place in the larger community of professional scholars? Then do agricultural education researchers pursue those problems through lifetime careers toward solving those problems and, in so doing, become recognized as international experts on the subject? Do current researchers in agricultural education jump from one easily-done problem to the next?

Do agricultural education researchers work on critical problems as groups of scholars? Or do we operate as individuals and insist on working alone because each harbors some fear that sharing ideas might somehow give a peer some competitive edge? Is the focus of much research about demonstrating the ability to complete the process of doing research primarily as an academic exercise toward earning promotion and tenure? Clearly it is time to recognize that group research can assemble and bring to bear the unique contributions of several individuals, and in so doing work toward scholarly solutions that are transferrable to the larger education and agricultural professions. This may earn for the profession a level of respect for being able to address critical problems in the larger community of scholars, and in so doing earn respect for each member of the research groups.

Challenges for Tomorrow’s Giants in Agricultural Education

There are real-world scientific problems in the larger professions in which agricultural education exists – the agricultural sciences and technologies, and education – to which agricultural education can make important contributions. At this author’s institution researchers in agricultural education and its related programs are moving toward identifying the research needs of the larger agricultural scientific and education community and are seeking to fill identified need areas within. For example the teacher education professionals are engaged in research with agricultural technology colleagues on integrated alternative energy models and the educational programs to implement those models as a means to improve lives of farmers and small business owners. They are working with peers in several other agriculture departments and various other departments across campus.

Some colleagues in this author’s department are working with researchers from across campus on research on electronic communications technologies and the implications that they have for rural community development. Both of these examples are research projects that fit into the larger agricultural experiment station agenda, into a campus-wide research agenda, and have potential for funding from both traditional and non-traditional sources.

By comparison with others across the nation, the home department of this author is small. The majority of professionals in agricultural education are within departments that are too small to stand alone and be able to marshal the resources necessary to compete for grants to fund large, multi-year research programs. Therefore agricultural education researchers must work together.

In recent years agricultural education unit heads have been working within the NCAC-024 agricultural education administrative group to foster and promote the idea that this profession must engage in collaborative research. It must be done in order to compete for grants, in order to establish multi-year and multi-institution research programs, and in order to have a large enough

presence within the larger community of scholars to be recognized. There is little other viable alternative. Cooperation is necessary to compete.

At this point in this discussion it may be worthwhile to consider a difference between the terms “research programs” versus “research projects.” A review of the literature in the profession for the past 50 years or so reveals many agricultural education researchers have multiple articles representing many different research projects. While this may represent a diversity of research interests and expertise, it more likely represents individual research activity that lacks focus. With a few exceptions – for example David Williams spent a career focusing on supervised agricultural experiences as learning laboratories – the research done by many, this author included, could best be described as a series of “projects,” not necessarily related to one another. Few agricultural education professionals ever focus on one problem area, and few ever develop a series of related projects that could be described as a “research program.” If there ever to be hope to achieve any lasting impact on the larger professions and on society, the profession must assume responsibility for this issue.

Agricultural education researchers should participate in an exercise of introspection and honestly describe for themselves their individual “research program.” Then members might review the list of current agricultural education profession and seek to identify who might be identified in 25 years as the “giants” among current professionals. If one encounters difficulty in this activity, then the question is why? Each member should ask, “What contributions am I making to research that will have a lasting impact on practice?” “What am I doing to advance scholarship in agricultural education that may be referenced for years to come?”

It may not be numbers of articles written or even the numbers of times that an author is referenced that makes a lasting contribution to the profession. Robert Warmbrod’s greatest contribution may be his support for high standards in research. Glen Shinn’s contribution may be for assembling teams of good researchers and then enabling them to do their jobs. Ed Osborne’s contribution may well be his ability to listen to the deliberations about how to move this profession forward and then to summarize them in a form that can be understood and implemented, in effect turning visions into plans. Kirby Barrick’s contribution may be his work in organizing the profession to create realistic standards for teacher education programs. Rob Terry’s contribution may be to constantly remind the profession that, regardless of the missions added to agricultural education departments, they have always been and will always be linked to effective high school agriculture programs.

Who will be the next generation of agricultural education professionals identified as giants from this generation? What meaningful and impactful contributions will these individuals have made to warrant that designation? In closing, these remarks will return to the larger culture context in which agricultural education programs exist and reference modern pop culture. From the 2009 movie, *Star Trek*, the character Captain Pike speaks to a young civilian Jim Kirk, “You can settle for a less than ordinary life, or do you feel like you were meant for something better? Something special?”

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