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The Search for Relevance

Tracy Kitchel, Ph.D.[1]

Abstract

Dr. Tracy Kitchel presented the 2020 AAAE Distinguished Lecture as an online presentation that included break-out room discussions during the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) hosted virtually in May 2021. The 2020 Annual Meeting of AAAE moved to a virtual format and was modified shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020; one modification included moving the 2020 Distinguished Lecture to the 2021 Annual Meeting of AAAE. The article is a philosophical work based upon the author's experiences in the profession and as a higher education administrator.

Introduction

Shortly after I was invited to do this lecture, the one thing that crystalized quickly was the topic: the search for relevance. I was excited about this topic because it gave me an opportunity to address some things that were timely – at that point, in late 2019 – while also packaging some salient thoughts that have been percolating in my brain across my career thus far. However, I had to re-evaluate when COVID-19 struck. Originally, I was going to present this lecture in May 2020, but we held off and I'm appreciative. You would not have seen the best of me at that time. As I have reflected more, I began to settle into the idea that what I originally wanted to share was not only still relevant but perhaps even more timely as we have been required to rethink our worldview, and connected to that, our relevance, through COVID. This is not, however, a COVID lecture. I think we've talked about that enough over the last year. Therefore, I'm excited to share some thoughts with you today in hope it resonates now and into the future.

I am also excited because this title – the search for relevance – allows me to link this lecture to a personal love of mine, Star Trek. In 1984, Star Trek III: The Search for Spock was released in movie theaters. It was the first Star Trek movie I saw in a movie theater. It helped lead me down a path toward sketching starships while watching TV episodes and movies, to buying guides to the Enterprise and memorizing the movie lines and ship layouts. And as you can imagine, it was my gateway to rousing popularity in school.

The synopsis of Star Trek III boils down to this. In Star Trek II, Spock is about to sacrifice his life, but his memories are implanted in Dr. McCoy before that death. At the beginning of Star Trek III, it is discovered that 1. Spock's body could have regenerated to health and 2. his mind and body could somehow be rejoined. The officers of the Enterprise steal their battle worn ship – see Star Trek II – back to a mystery planet – again, see Star Trek II – to try to recover Spock. They unexpectedly encounter Klingons, experience the loss of Kirk's new-found scientist son, blow up the Enterprise in a last-ditch effort to save everyone's lives, find Spock, and steal the Klingon's ship to take Spock back to his home world of Vulcan to rejoin his mind to his regenerated body. And the adventure continues.

How does this science fiction story fit together with my topic today? Here are themes to glean from the synopsis. One theme is sacrifice, and there are multiple examples of that. Spock sacrifices his

[1] Tracy Kitchel is a Professor of Agricultural Education and Senior Associate Dean & Director of Faculty and Staff Affairs in the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences at The Ohio State University, 140 Agricultural Administration Building, Columbus, OH 43210, kitchel.2@osu.edu.

life for his ship in Start Trek II which leads to his death, the crew sacrifices their careers for Spock in stealing the Enterprise, Kirk sacrifices his beloved Enterprise to save his crew's lives, and Kirk's son is sacrificed in saving Spock from the Klingons. The other interconnected theme that is spoken in Star Trek movies two through four is this: even though we generally believe the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, sometimes the most human thing to do is support the notion that the needs of the few outweigh the needs of the many. We see that when the crew sacrifices their careers – and potentially their lives – to save Spock.

In our search for relevance as scholars in agricultural communication, agricultural education, Extension education and leadership, we need to be able to ask ourselves what it is we are willing to sacrifice and when should we embrace opportunities of taking care of the needs of the few despite the needs of the many. Our search for relevance asks us to make changes and sacrifices that are real, and not superficial. Our search for relevance asks us to sacrifice something bigger for something better.

As I unpack this topic, a few "givens." One, what I share does not reflect perfection on my part, meaning there are things I will discuss today that know I need to work on myself. Two, you may disagree with some of the things I share. Great! Most of us have or are working towards PhD's. We should be able to debate big ideas and topics. I think this is a topic worthy of our debate.

This topic has several layers. In thinking about how to frame this conversation, I am borrowing loosely from the living systems theory. Holliday and Jones (2015) synthesized the theory of living systems in a very practical way to give us a lens around organizations and communities. The gist is the living systems theory has 4 defining characteristics:

1. There are divergent parts (think of different kinds or types of cells)
2. There are relationships among parts (think of systems made up of organs)
3. There is a whole (the divergent parts come together in relationship to form a convergent whole with new characteristics and capabilities).
4. There is a self-integrating property leading to innovation, adaptation, and new life

In borrowing from that framework, I have layered relevance across our living system of AAAE – from our parts – its membership – and across the whole. I'm first going to start broadly to unpack our search for relevance as a profession – or as a whole – by answering the question, who cares about our fields? We're going to then unpack our relevance among ourselves, within the profession by answering the question, who feels and does not feel relevant to the profession? Finally, we're going to talk about our personal relevance as scholars by thinking about the question, what is my faculty identity?

Relevance as a Profession

The first question was, who cares about our fields of agricultural communication, education, leadership? When I was originally working on this lecture in early 2020, I was on social media and I noted that the AAEA, the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association, had announced its fellows. In understanding that there's an algorithm that fills my Twitter feed, I was curious about why this post populated since I did not follow AAEA. After some searching, I found that this tweet had populated in my feed because I follow AgWired.com and Farms.com, national agricultural news outlets. As I investigated further, I found that AAEA is followed by Ag Week, Farm and Dairy, Farm Show, National Farmers Union, Case IH, and National Corn Growers, just to name a few agricultural organizations and companies.

It could easily be explained that they receive those followers because they have a bigger organization and can afford a dedicated staff member around social media marketing. However, ask yourself the uncomfortable question – would that matter for us?

I need to acknowledge I know that there are great connections and relationships happening individually and locally by our faculty in AAAE and in your departments, but I'm asking us to think about our professional as a whole. The essential question is this – are we a known and wanted commodity as a profession? Do they – whomever they should be – think of us right off the bat? I review dossiers of faculty from across our college and work closely with our department chairs. There are examples from our colleagues outside our profession that tell me there is something collective happening in other fields that is not happening in ours. I think we have room to grow here, to strategically think about how we make ourselves relevant as a profession.

In diving deeper, we need to think about our scholarly relevance. We need to think about who should be reading our work and how we translate our science toward impact. We do a good job of asking the granular questions about good research. But the big question we do not directly answer is this: "is it good science?" If you look at the ways we review our conference papers and journal articles, we ask questions around elements of good research. Don't get me wrong – this is essential. If our instruments aren't sound, if our questions are not well-developed, if our frameworks are not solid, if our methods lack rigor, then it doesn't matter. Garbage in, garbage out as Bobby Torres used to tell us in research methods. However, nowhere do we explicitly ask – is this good science? In our manuscript about theoretical frameworks, Anna Ball and I (2014, p. 196) stated a thought inspired by Carneiro, Cangussú, and Fernandes (2007): "It is important to always keep in mind that a solid research question drives the quality of the science."

In thinking about contemporary science, authors of an article written in *BioScience* noted the following (Elliott, et al., 2016):

> Scientific practice should be more explicitly recognized as an iterative path through multiple approaches rather than as a linear process of moving through pre-defined steps. Of course, this does not mean that "anything goes"; rather, it facilitates more careful thought about how to fund, publish, and teach the right combinations of methods that will enable the scientific community to tackle the big issues confronting society today. p. 1

In previous AAAE meetings, we have talked about our research FTE, our lack thereof, as a contributor to our research woes. I definitely think that is true as I see how other faculty members across our college are resourced through research time. Low research time perpetuates an isolated, low-hanging fruit approach to conducting research. Some of that's necessary, but if we're being honest, many of us who are tenured have done so on a crop versus a sampling of low-hanging fruit. We continue to do better on this front. I see junior faculty having clearer research agendas and more robust studies than perhaps those graduating in my era. But in the end, I still think we suffer from a lack of understanding and consistency of what good science is for us.

As I close this section, here are a few reflection questions for us to consider. For this section, our questions are:

> Who is and who should be tapping into our profession's expertise and scholarship?
> How do we improve the impact of our science?
> What can we learn from our colleagues outside our profession regarding relevance?

Relevance Among Us

Who feels and does not feel relevant to our profession? We're going to deconstruct this question by looking at two dimensions. First, I want to establish the importance of this type of relevance by laying out some important, related terms: belongingness and inclusion. In their study, Baumeister and Leary (1995) noted that "the need to belong can be considered a fundamental human motivation" (p. 497). This research area has focused sharply on close relationships, but it has also been studied more broadly with various groups and organizations. Although belongingness might not fully address our overarching question for this dimension of relevance, it does provide us with a fundamental understanding of what is important at our psychological cores. As we think broadly about our organization, the other term we should unpack is inclusion.

> Brimhalla, et al. (2017) synthesized that:
> increased feelings of inclusion have been linked to improved organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and retention (Brimhall et al., 2014; Mor Barak et al., 2006; Shore et al., 2011; Travis & Mor Barak, 2010) and decreased stress, conflict, and employee turnover (Hopkins et al.,2010; Hwang & Hopkins, 2012; Mor Barak et al., 2006; Nishii, 2013; Travis & Mor Barak, 2010). p. 235

In AAAE, we have been talking about inclusion as it's a key part of our strategic plan with an active task force in play. Also, some of you have been or are developing your scholarly agendas in and around this area of diversity, equity and inclusion or DEI. But to get to the brass tacks, what does our organizational practice of inclusion look like?

Brimhalla, et al. (2017, p. 234) concluded that "organizational leaders who dedicate time and resources to developing high-quality interactions will benefit by increasing employee perceptions of inclusion 6 and 12 months later." How do we foster interactions in our organization? Let's look at two ways. First, we'll look at this from a disciplinary perspective – does everyone in our fields feel relevant to this organization? Second, we will dive deeper as it relates to the identities of people who feel relevant and included in our organization and those who might not.

I will attempt to tread lightly as I carry privilege. In a survey that was deployed by AAAE Strategic Planning Goal #1 Team in early April 2020, they asked about our sense of inclusion. I remember writing something along the lines that our profession takes good care of those who are white, male, straight and Christian… and then I noted I identify as all four of those things. However, I'm all those things and I'm an agricultural education faculty member, which has historically carried disciplinary privilege in this organization. So, I acknowledge my privilege and with my privilege I will attempt to advocate for those who do not carry the same privilege.

Disciplinary Inclusion

According to Lumby (2012, p. 580), power is "exerted covertly through the structures, processes and agency that shape what can be thought, what can be discussed and what can be disputed or resisted." Our power structure is interesting. I argue how we would like to say we align our power and how it is actually aligned are two different things. I think we would like to say we have these great complimentary disciplines and that's our strength as a profession, therefore, that is our power structure. However, that's now how our power flows. Our awards, our conferences, our committees and even some of our offices are aligned by regions. Our power is structured through regions. We must critically look at how our power is structured to understand where we demonstrate value. And for the record, I am not against regional conferences. I am simply asking us to examine the role of regions in our profession as it relates to the power structure.

I would argue that this approach worked well when we were a far more homogenous organization in regard to disciplines, when we focused on teacher education. Regions and regional conferences served as ways for us to connect on a much smaller level. When the profession expanded and changed, our power structure did not. We continued to see similar results, which is heavy engagement by teacher education. Yes, we have active members outside of teacher education; however, how many faculty members show up because they and/or their department chairs feel the pressure of the *politics of being seen* as it relates to promotion and tenure? We have colleagues outside of teacher education who would be great contributors but who are not at the table. To be clear, we have colleagues outside of teacher education who are currently great contributors, but we could have many more.

I can appreciate history and tradition as much as the next the person. I'm wired to value nostalgia quite a bit. However, as noted in a recent meeting I attended, history and tradition can also be used as proxies for exclusion. I think we need to rethink how we are organized at our core, by asking tough questions: What do we value? Who do we really want at the table in regard to disciplines? What are we willing to change or sacrifice to make something better?

Personological Inclusion

Also, according to Lumby (2012, p. 581), "Culture is a fundamental shaping and disciplinary force on which organizations depend. Culture and the divisions it embodies are therefore a necessary focus of leaders and a particularly potent medium for those who aim to support social justice." We need to really this about how social equity and justice plays a role in the destiny we've painted for our organization.

I have seen over the years where we have taken comments that question our ways of doing as personal affronts. If we can't accept diversity of thought, I can't imagine we are going to accept diversity of person well at all. However, I want to be careful about that idea of *diversity of thought*. In a workshop at the North Central AAAE conference several years ago, Dr. Levon Esters talked about that concern directly. He cautioned that diversity of thought can be used to avoid the real work of improving diversity of person. In other words, addressing diversity of thought is not the silver bullet to address all issues related to diversity, equity and inclusion. It is merely the first step among many. Diversity of thought is important; otherwise, we are speaking in echo chambers, and we do not create spaces for other ways of thinking and doing. I can speak from personal experience in our profession either witnessing or being at the other end of conversations where comments are ignored, or the conversation is shut down altogether. However, to get diversity of thought, it needs to be accompanied by work related to diversity of person. Those two things are connected.

When I was a graduate student almost 20 years ago, to my knowledge, we had very few members of our professional community who openly identified LGBTQ+. I could count on two hands the number of people of color at our conferences. I think about our profession today and things have changed, but we certainly have not arrived. We have lost people from our membership along the way. These are good people, smart people, but people who may think and/or look differently than some of us. We have people who do not feel like they belong because of their identity. And, it's our loss. I've heard their stories and so I'm choosing to not tell their specific stories for them but rather amplify the themes of what I've heard over the years: women who have been hushed or ignored in the middle of meetings. Those in the LGBTQ+ community who are made to feel they are not welcome by being themselves. BIPOC colleagues who are told they need to blend in more. If you have not heard these stories, you need to ask yourself why, and if you think these are old narratives, I guarantee they are not.

What can be done? I'll go back to the beginning of this section and say, with my privilege, I need to continue to be a better ally, but here's a list for starters: speak up in meetings if you feel you have the voice; make space to listen to those who don't share your background; lift up others who need lifting up; educate yourself not only about DEI, but on other perspectives and experiences; consider changes to policies and practices that systematically lift certain people over others. This is the part where the needs of the few outweigh the needs of the many; this is also where we will be way better for it.

As I transition to the next section, here are some addition questions for your consideration:

> We have people who have left us and have never come back – why? And how do we get them back?
> If we changed our power structure, what we would lose and what would we gain?
> What are we willing to sacrifice for the needs of those who do not feel included (for whatever the reason)?

Relevance as a Scholar

One of my favorite parts about having been a department chair and now as a leader for faculty affairs in our college, is the mentoring of faculty. One of the things you have to attend to, to effectively mentor faculty, is to focus on faculty identity – to help faculty see and/or feel how they are valued for their contributions. There's nothing worse than that feeling of not having a clear grasp of your faculty identity. You don't feel valued, and you certainly don't feel relevant. From personal experiences, there are a few moments where I struggled with my faculty identity.

I was drawn to my first job as an Assistant Professor at the University of Kentucky (UK) because of the opportunity to create. I walked into the department with one other Assistant Professor in my area and a department that was 3 years old. Community and Leadership Development or CLD is a multidisciplinary department that, unlike most of your all's departments, was not born out of Agricultural Education. That department's culture was borrowed from Arts and Sciences. So, as I began to develop my identity as a faculty member, it was very challenging. I felt like I was questioned as a scholar and my field was questioned by some of the senior faculty. I really struggled with my faculty identity because I didn't know if I or my field was valued. It took me a long time to realize that when people challenge you or your work, it's not necessarily a personal attack. Eventually, those conversations led to other, deeper conversations about topics I had not considered. In many ways, I saw some of my biggest faculty growth at UK. It forced me to think differently than my previous trainings at two other universities. It required me to pick up and examine closely the beliefs and thoughts I had held tightly for years. In the end, I found that to be one of the best faculty identity exercises.

In case you're not in a department who can safely put you through such a mental exercise, I have a few other ideas. Throughout my career, I was fortunate to forge a strong friendship to my friend and colleague, Dr. Anna Ball. On many occasions, we spent time dissecting this topic of faculty identity. What do you want to be when you grow up? How can I best contribute to the department? What do I need to get over, about myself? I will cherish the reflective time we spent in Gentry Hall asking the questions, playing the "what if" game and challenging each other's thinking. I have also found mentors in my life who have done that for me, as well. I started my lecture acknowledging those people because mentors have been such a significant part of my growth and faculty identity.

I have been forced to look at my faculty identity several times, but more so as I have transitioned to administration. Part of faculty identity building is thinking about the next thing – the next project, the next new course, the next service contribution, the next steps. I would share that the natural progression for faculty is not necessarily administration. Although we expect leadership out of our senior faculty, that is not the same as moving into administration. I really appreciated that there were two hangouts at last year's AAAE virtual conference: one that Anna Ball, Scott Burris and I hosted on being an administrator and one on faculty leadership. Although there is some transferability between those skills that make you a good professor and those that make you a good administrator, they are not one and the same. I think the challenge post-tenure is processing the ways you can challenge yourself or maybe even reinvent yourself, so you continue to find joy in what you do. It's that essential question – does it bring me joy? – that should drive your thinking and reflection. You are still going to have to do things that you don't like as that is true with every job. However, the points of joy need to outweigh the points that are not so joyous. I often see this play out with prospective doctoral students who fall in love with the idea of being called a "Dr." as opposed to be committed to the reality of what it means to earn the research degree of Ph.D. And it's not about ability. It's about the question, does science and curiosity bring me joy? I find it is easy to talk ourselves into doing something because we are in love with the idea or even, because we think we should because of some external force or pressure. For me, it's been the difficult path of separating the things I can do from the things that bring me joy. I can do many things, but not all of them give me joy and energy. As I've walked further down the path of administration, I've also realized that maybe my next thing that might bring me joy is rejoining the faculty. Don't panic, (current Ohio State ACEL chair) Shannon Washburn, not any time soon. I still have some things I want to accomplish. However, it is definitely an option I am open to considering. So, focus your reflections on joy and be real about yourself when you do it.

In sum, I highly recommend you find your wise council or group of mentors who can help guide you along the way. Be open to difficult conversations about yourself and your work. Be self-aware about who you are and what you want to be. And lastly, set your mind on joy. Not on what's flashy. Not on what sounds neat. Not on a title. And, not on what others think you should do.

Here are a few questions to reflect upon regarding this section:

What brings you joy?
What do you want your faculty identity to be?
What are your next steps? What do you want to be when you grow up? (and, if you love what you're doing, don't overthink it)

Now What?

When I was Professor and Chair of the Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership (ACEL) at The Ohio State University, we had frank and candid conversations about change. If we were going to move the needle, we needed to make deep changes. Sometimes that was difficult, sometimes that was tiresome, but in three years, we looked and operated like a different department. And that did not happen because I made edicts from my chair's office. It was a collective effort to be uncomfortable, take some risks, try new things, to trust each other and make real – and not superficial – changes. It didn't end when I moved to the college office. I know Shannon Washburn is continuing those conversations. It takes time, it takes risk-taking, and it takes trust.

Change is hard. I recently watched a documentary on Netflix about the Challenger disaster. I was a child of the 80's, with a fourth-grade teacher who looked just like Christa McAuliffe, the teacher astronaut. I watched that shuttle launch with great anticipation, followed by great despair upon its explosion. Through the eyes of the documentary filmmakers, the argument is painted that even though

red flags we're being waved all along the way, that the push to stay on course by NASA with the number of shuttle launches that were promised outweighed the safety of the shuttle crew. People who were raising the red flags were being told that there were no problems, and the red flags were over-reactions (an example of gaslighting), and the NASA leadership was focused on moving forward without appropriate changes. The wrong things were sacrificed in this story and the needs of the few were ignored to the point of a tragic end. I think there's something to be learned from this story. We need to process where change is needed and is meaningful so the sacrifices and changes we do consider can lead to real impact. Let's stop pushing forward on the same path. Let's examine the red flags.

So, friends, are we ready to sacrifice, take the time, get uncomfortable, consider the needs of the few before the many, and make real changes all in the name of relevance for one and for all?

I believe in us. We've got some fantastic people who have transformative experiences to offer. But our current ways of doing could use some change. I think we have yet to come close to tapping the full potential of what AAAE collectively has to offer. Our living system of AAAE can be more relevant.

So, I leave the question to you. What do we do next to ensure we remain relevant?

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