

Teaching and Education Commentaries**Let's take a moment to celebrate great teaching!****James A. Sterns, Ph.D.***Oregon State University*

JEL Codes: A22, Q0

Keywords: AAEA, archival review, biases, teaching awards

Abstract

This commentary uses the history of the teaching awards program of the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association (AAEA) to examine the AAEA's commitment to the teaching mission of universities with undergraduate programs in agricultural and applied economics. Through an archival review of AAEA historical documents, it describes an evolving commitment. It also identifies, from the author's personal perspective, several awards program benefits and raises several concerns about potential biases in the selection of awardees. The commentary is, above all, a tribute to teaching and to AAEA teaching award recipients—past and future.

The Agricultural and Applied Economics Association has a rich and wonderful decades-long history of recognizing outstanding teaching. This commentary is an attempt to document this history and, in the process, to identify possible means for enriching the AAEA's institutional capacity to acknowledge and celebrate great teaching for decades to come.

The 2018 annual meetings of the AAEA marked the 51st year that the association has presented teaching awards to its members. The first recipient of an AAEA teaching award was Raymond R. Beneke, who was recognized at the 1968 annual meeting. Over time, the association began giving multiple awards, distinguishing recipients by their teaching experience—either early career (fewer than 10 years) or later career (10 or more years)—and their students' academic level—undergraduate or graduate.

Table 1 presents a complete list of award winners, whose names were culled in part from archival records maintained by the AAEA's Teaching, Learning and Communications (TLC) Section. These records date from 1997 and are accessible on the AAEA website (www.aaea.org/membership/sections/tlc/aaea-teaching-award-winners). Pre-1997 winners were identified through examination of the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*/*Journal of Farm Economics*, which for many years published committee reports, and the minutes of association annual business meetings and board meetings. These records shed light on the association's evolving commitment to the teaching mission. The Awards Committee's annual reports to the AAEA Board are particularly rich in detail. Additional insights about the association's awards history are captured in Paul Barkley's *A Centennial History of the AAEA* (Barkley 2010). Readers should note that these archival records capture an amazing amount of minutia, and that minutia is a testament to the incredible commitment and service many past members of the AAEA have dedicated to furthering the vitality and viability of the organization.

The AFEA (as the AAEA was formerly known) initiated an awards program in the early 1940s, but those efforts did not include any consideration about teaching. As Barkley (2010) notes the idea for establishing an award for outstanding undergraduate teaching was student driven. Student ag econ clubs, which had begun to form on campuses in the post WW-II era, were woven into the broader context of the national association by the late 1950s, including student-organized programming at the annual meetings and a national student organization that was affiliated with the AFAE. In 1962, student members proposed to the AFEA Executive Committee that the association should annually name and award an

“outstanding undergraduate teacher in agricultural economics,” which ultimately led to the first award in 1968.

These students also proposed that the association organize a workshop for its members to improve the quality of undergraduate teaching in agricultural economics. The result was two national workshops, one held in 1963, which had 84 faculty participants, and one in 1966, which had 90 faculty participants (Barkley 2010). These workshops represent the first recorded efforts by the association to emphasize the teaching mission in the association’s first 50-plus years of existence.

The development of the teaching award and the two national teaching workshops were early indicators of a fundamental shift in the association’s collective perspective about teaching. John Sjo (1974) documented this shift in his committee report to the AAEA Board, “The AAEA: Its Responsibility for Instructional Leadership.” This report begins quite starkly, “In the 54 years since its founding in 1919, the American Agricultural Economics Association has been an association primarily of researchers, not teachers” (p. 436). Later in the same report, Sjo notes, “Undergraduate instruction has not been viewed among agricultural economists as their most prestigious activity” (p. 438). Sjo concludes, “Historically the role of the Association in undergraduate instruction has been one of neglect” (p. 439). In short, the teaching mission was not one of the historic priorities of the association.

A complete read of Sjo’s report documents the numerous steps the AAEA leadership took during the 1960s and early 1970s to elevate the association’s engagement in the teaching mission. These steps included establishment of the teaching award and a commitment to include program content about teaching at the association’s annual meetings.

Since the 1970s, the AAEA’s commitment to the teaching mission has incrementally grown and matured. Additional workshops and symposia have continued, the teaching award has been refined to include at first two and then three categories of awardees per year, and in 2002, the AAEA’s Teaching, Learning, and Communications (TLC) Section was established. The section has institutionalized teaching-focused programming at the annual meetings through its track sessions.

Table 1 lists all those who have been awarded for great teaching. And it leads me to observe how, in unexpected ways, my personal story is woven within the association’s teaching award history. As an undergraduate majoring in agricultural economics at Kansas State University in the early 1980s, I enrolled in Bryan Schurle’s Principles of Agricultural Economics course. To this day, I remember Bryan’s lectures and more importantly, his passion, his dedication to his craft, and his sincere interest in his students’ learning. He made the course material relevant, compelling, and, at times, even fun. That course, more than any other, set me on my professional career path as an agricultural economist. Bryan Schurle received the AAEA Undergraduate Teaching Award in 1987.

At the time I was an undergraduate, the Kansas State Agricultural Economics Department’s policy for undergraduate advising was to assign every student in the major to a faculty member, who was responsible for student advising and mentoring. John Sjo was my advisor, and he was the first person to suggest to me that I should consider graduate studies in agricultural economics. He was the mentor who made the difference early in my professional development, because he took the time to be personally invested in my future. He saw in me potential that I did not personally recognize, and he helped me appreciate the scope and breadth of possibilities that my future could entail. Dr. Sjo helped me see beyond the world I knew. John Sjo received the AAEA Undergraduate Teaching Award in 1973.

I mention these two anecdotes of my personal history to highlight examples that ever so slightly pull back the veil of mystery familiar to anyone who teaches undergraduate students. It is so easy to ask, “Am I really making a difference?” Or worse, if it has been one of those days, perhaps after grading a midterm exam that did not go particularly well, you might ask, “Why do I even try?” My retort: Dr. Schurle and, if he were still alive, Dr. Sjo would be hard pressed to remember me as one of their former undergraduate students in the early 1980s. Yet, I remember them. The echoes of teaching excellence are slow to reverberate and often go unheard, but I am convinced that no matter how muted the evidence, great teaching and great teachers change lives and are powerful forces for progress in our world.

Table 1 AAEA Teaching Award Winners (Names and Institutions), 1968 to 2018

Year	Undergraduate Teaching Award		Graduate Teaching Award
	< 10 Years' Experience	10+ Years' Experience	
2018	Sierra Howry University of Wisconsin, River Falls	James Sterns Oregon State University	Gerald Shively Purdue University
2017	Alex Shanoyan Kansas State University	Chris Barrett Cornell University	William Wilson North Dakota State University
2016	Jason Bergtold Kansas State University	Andrew Barkley Kansas State University	Philip Garcia University of Illinois
2015	Nicholas Paulson University of Illinois	W. Marshall Frasier Colorado State University	Richard Sexton University of California, Davis
2014	Brian Briggeman Kansas State University	Cheryl Wachenheim North Dakota State University	Richard Just University of Maryland
2013	Shannon Ferrell Oklahoma State University	Ron Hansen University of Nebraska	Wally Tyner Purdue University
2012	Michael A. Gunderson University of Florida	Stephen Devadoss University of Idaho	Terry Roe University of Minnesota
2011	Scott Downey Purdue University	Frank Dooley Purdue University	Stephen Devadoss University of Idaho
2010	Hayley Chouinard Washington State University	Kerry K. Litzenberg Texas A&M University	Shida Henneberry Oklahoma State University
2009	James A. Sterns University of Florida	Michael A. Boland Kansas State University	Kenneth A. Foster Purdue University
2008	F. Bailey Norwood Oklahoma State University	James B. Kliebenstein Iowa State University	Francis M. Epplin Oklahoma State University
2007	Darren Hudson Mississippi State University	Dixie W. Reaves Virginia Polytechnic Institute	Michael E. Wetzstein University of Georgia
2006	Christine Wilson Purdue University	Donald Liu University of Minnesota	Richard Boisvert Cornell University
2005	Lisa House University of Florida	Paul Wilson University of Arizona	James Richardson Texas A&M University
2004	Marshall Frasier Colorado State University	Daniel Tilley Oklahoma State University	B. Wade Brorsen Oklahoma State University
2003	Allen F. Wysocki University of Florida	James Beierlein Pennsylvania State University	Paul Preckel Purdue University
2002	Cynda Clary New Mexico State University	Ronald Deiter Iowa State University	Allen M. Featherstone Kansas State University

Table 1 Continued.

Year	Undergraduate Teaching Award		Graduate Teaching Award
	< 10 Years' Experience	10+ Years' Experience	
2001	Michael A. Boland Kansas State University	Jay T. Akridge Purdue University	Ron Mittelhammer Washington State University
2000	Frank Dooley Purdue University	Raymond Folwell Washington State University	Jeffrey Williams University of California, Davis
1999	Mary A. Marchant University of Kentucky	Carl R. Zulauf The Ohio State University	Oral Capps, Jr. Texas A&M University
1998	Patrick J. Byrne University of Florida	Gary F. Fairchild University of Florida	James E. Wilen University of California, Davis
1997	Lois Schertz Willett Cornell University	Michael E. Wetzstein University of Georgia	Jean-Paul Chavas University of Wisconsin, Madison
1996	E. Jane Luzar Louisiana State University	Steven Sonka University of Illinois	Walter Thurman North Carolina State University
1995	Andrew Barkley Kansas State University	David Kohl Virginia Polytechnic Institute	
1994	Kim Harris Southern Illinois University	Fred White University of Georgia	
1993	Edward McLaughlin Cornell University	John Kadlec Purdue University	
1992	Stephen Turner University of Georgia	Stephen Erickson Purdue University	
1991	Carl Zulauf Ohio State University	Wayne Purcell Virginia Polytechnic Institute	
1990	Dorothy Comer University of Florida	Bernard Erven Ohio State University	
1989	Jill Sovocool Findeis Pennsylvania State University	Joseph Uhl Purdue University	
1988	Michael Hudson University of Illinois	Josef Broder University of Georgia	
1987	Bryan Schurle Kansas State University	Lawrence Bohl Purdue University	
1986	James Russell Oklahoma State University	Stephen Matthews University of Missouri	
1985	Kerry Litzenberg Texas A&M University	John Penson, Jr. Texas A&M University	
1984	David Kohl Virginia Polytechnic Institute	Robert Oehrtman Oklahoma State University	

Table 1 Continued.

Year	Undergraduate Teaching Award		Graduate Teaching Award
	< 10 Years' Experience	10+ Years' Experience	
1983	Josef Broder University of Georgia	H. Evan Drummond University of Florida	
1982	Joe Davis University of Kentucky	Richard Aplin Cornell University	
1981	Kenneth Casavant Washington State University	W. David Downey Purdue University	
1980	Ronald Hanson University of Nebraska	Robert Taylor Purdue University	
1975	Lawrence Bohl Purdue University	Kenneth Boggs University of Missouri	
1974	Glenn Himes Ohio State University	Lester Manderscheid Michigan State University	
1973	Wayne Purcell Oklahoma State University	John Sjo Kansas State University	
1972	W. David Downey Purdue University	R.G.F. Spitze University of Illinois	
1971	John Goodwin Oklahoma State University	Lawrence Darrah Cornell University	
1970	Robert W. Taylor Purdue University		
1969	Albert H. Harrington Washington State University		
1968	Raymond R. Beneke Iowa State University		

Note: Prior to 1996, the AAEA had no award recognizing distinguished graduate teaching. Prior to 1971, the AAEA had only one award; it recognized distinguished undergraduate teaching.

Sources: Agricultural and Applied Economics Association, Teaching, Learning, and Communication Section, <https://www.aaea.org/membership/sections/tlc/aaea-teaching-award-winners>; Awards Committee Reports, *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 1968–1996 (December issues)

Compilation of Table 1 reinforced my perception that there are some truly great teachers in our profession. Two of them have been recognized by the AAEA at both the undergraduate and graduate level: Michael Wetzstein, who received the undergraduate teaching award in 1997 and the graduate teaching award in 2007, and Stephen Devadoss, who received the undergraduate teaching award in 2012 and the graduate teaching award in 2011. When asked, Michael Wetzstein admitted that the approaches for teaching undergraduates and graduate students are fundamentally different. With the former, the focus is on motivation and providing content in an array of formats (i.e., graphs, mathematics, numerical examples, real-world applications, and so on); with the latter, the focus is on theory and content that are just plain hard to learn without help (i.e., the intuition, the grind, and the poetry of economics).

Table 1 also documents the sustained success of awardees who have been recognized both early and later in their careers. Thirteen individuals have been awarded the AAEA Distinguished Undergraduate Teaching Award twice, once for the “Under 10 years of teaching” and once for the “More than 10 years teaching” awards. These are

- W. David Downey, Purdue University (1972, 1981)
- Wayne Purcell, Oklahoma State University/Virginia Polytechnic Institute (1973, 1991)
- Lawrence Bohl, Purdue University (1975, 1987)
- Ronald Hanson, University of Nebraska (1980, 2013)
- Josef Broder, University of Georgia (1983, 1988)
- David Kohl, Virginia Polytechnic Institute (1984, 1995)
- Kerry Litzenberg, Texas A&M (1985, 2010)
- Carl Zulauf, Ohio State University (1991, 1999)
- Andrew Barkley, Kansas State University (1995, 2016)
- Frank Dooley, Purdue University (2000, 2011)
- Michael Boland, Kansas State University (2001, 2009)
- Marshall Frasier, Colorado State University (2004, 2015)
- James Sterns, University of Florida/Oregon State University (2009, 2018)

The awardees in Table 1 are also awardees of other organizations and agencies. Many of them are among the 60 academics recognized by the Western Agricultural Economics Association for their teaching excellence (WAEA 1982–2009). Nearly a third of the 40 recipients of the Southern Agricultural Economics Association’s “Outstanding Teaching of a Course” award are also listed in Table 1 (SAEA 2019). Nineteen of the AAEA awardees have been recognized at the regional or national level by the United States Department of Agriculture’s National Award Program for Excellence in College and University Teaching in Food and Agricultural Sciences (USDA 2019a; USDA 2019b).

Table 1 also raises some personal concerns that I hope will be addressed by the AAEA leadership and by the membership as a whole. First, most of the awardees have been men. Of the 107 individuals that have been recognized for their teaching excellence, only 13 have been women. Second, the 107 awardees have been faculty members at just 32 universities. Although that number represents more than half of the 1862 Land Grants, none of the awardees have been faculty members at one of the nineteen 1890 Land Grants. None have been faculty members at one of the 32 tribal colleges and universities that have land grant status. Only two have been faculty members at one of the 58 institutions recognized by the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) as Non-Land Grant Colleges of Agriculture. Similarly, the majority of awardees of other agricultural associations and agencies have been male and employed at 1862 Land Grants.

To address concerns about potential inherent biases in the processes for acknowledging and awarding great teaching, the first step would be to document the empirical evidence, which this missive partial does. The second step would be to seek evidence of causality, and the third would be to raise awareness and prioritization, and then commitment to substantive action. All these tasks are well within our individual and collective means.

One of my former students inadvertently provided a wonderful summary of what it means to pursue great teaching. In describing her study abroad experience with a program that I had co-led, she said, “Maturity and stamina are vital. If you’re unwilling to be wrong, don’t bother going. It’s exhilarating, transformative, and ridiculously fun.” That description can just as easily apply to the pursuit of excellence in the classroom. Let’s take a moment to celebrate that excellence!

About the Author: James A. Sterns is an Associate Professor, Department of Applied Economics, Oregon State University. (Corresponding Author: jasterns@oregonstate.edu)

References

- Barkley, Paul W. 2010. *A Centennial History of the AAEA*. Agricultural and Applied Economics Association.
- Sjo, John. 1974. "The AAEA: Its Responsibility for Instructional Leadership." *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 56:2(May):436-440.
- SAEA (Southern Agricultural Economics Association). 2019. "Outstanding Contribution to Teaching Award Recipients." Accessed March 22, 2019. <https://www.saea.org/award/octa.html>.
- Student Activities Committee. 1962. "Report of the Student Activities Committee." *Journal of Farm Economics* 44:1979-1798.
- USDA. 2019a. "Previous Teaching Awards Recipients 2010-2018." Accessed March 22, 2019. <https://nifa.usda.gov/sites/default/files/program/Previous-Teaching-Awards-Recipients-2010-2018.pdf>.
- USDA. 2019b. "Past Recipients of Teaching Awards." Accessed March 22, 2019. https://www.teach-usda.cals.vt.edu/pages/Past_Recipients.html.
- WAEA (Western Agricultural Economics Association). 1982-2009. *Western Journal of Agricultural Economics (December issues)*. Award recipients since 2010 are posted on the Association's webpage, <http://www.waeaonline.org/about-waea/awards/past-award-winners>.