



THE GOLDEN SLATE

The official newsletter of the California
Agricultural Teachers' Association

Things I Wish I Would Have Known Entering This Profession

*By Shay Williams-Hopper, San Joaquin Region Supervisor
California Department of Education*

Thank you for joining this crazy, wild, fun profession. It is unlike anything else you will ever do. I remember as a first-year teacher being in awe of the profession and wanting to be recognized as an outstanding contributor to education. That led to a lot of undue pressure, anxiety, and stress on my part. I became a part of a department that consistently earned recognition at both the state and national levels, this led me to believe that if I worked really hard, I could live up to their history and tradition. As time has passed, I have matured in my thinking. I have contemplated what I wish someone would have told me as a new professional in this career, and I am going to share those thoughts with you today.

Number one: You do not have to know and do everything. I know that as a first-year teacher asking for help can sound scary and make you feel inadequate, but it's the best thing that you can do for your career! It's going to help you grow and learn work-life balance, while also engaging community members in your program that can then advocate for you. I highly recommend considering the implementation of a volunteer inventory, such as the one provided in this resource: [Alumni Volunteer Resource Inventory](#). By utilizing this tool, you can effectively identify individuals within your community who are enthusiastic about assisting you. This approach enables you to tap into their unique qualities and skills that you might not personally possess, thereby creating valuable opportunities for collaboration and growth.

Number two: Be the best program for your students, stakeholders, and community. We get so wrapped up in competition that the first thing we do is look at our peers and neighboring programs. We begin to compare the elements within our program to those in theirs. That's absolutely the wrong approach. You have been entrusted with students at your school – make them the best leaders, make them the best students that you possibly can. Do not compare

CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURAL TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

CALAGTEACHERS.ORG



yourself to the programs around you. Their methods suit their unique context and might not align with yours. That's perfectly fine. Talk to your stakeholders – the ag advisory committee, administrators, alumni, and current students – to see what their wants and needs are. Be adaptable and amenable to what is needed for your community and don't worry about what other people and other communities are doing.

Number three: The goal of our profession is to grow student leaders in career technical

education. Put the power in your students' hands. Allow them to take on the leadership role and thrive with that leadership role or fail with that leadership role. Lessons like learning how to write agendas, type up minutes, purchase supplies, and plan FFA meetings need to be the role of student members and not the ag teacher. Embrace their ideas and give them guidance as their advisor. Help them to see what will work and what might need to be adjusted. Let THEM be the leaders of your program. Empower them to take charge and lead our organization. I know your head is spinning right now, contemplating the potential for failure and its implications. You might be wondering if their failures would reflect negatively on you. However, from my perspective, embracing the possibility of their challenges and setbacks can help you become an all-star advisor. Why? Because there are so many more lessons in failure that they cannot learn from winning. I've shared this story before, but one of my master teachers one day took all my teaching supplies when I was student teaching and left me to punt in the classroom. I learned so much that day, even in my anger at him. I learned to be a better classroom teacher because he prepared me for the unexpected. Help your students to learn those lessons as well.

Number four: Winning takes on various appearances. I know that we have been ingrained to think that silver bowls and ribbons are the only way to show success in our program. Remember that our program is so much bigger than bowls and ribbons. Some of my greatest wins in the classroom had nothing to do with winning an award. Find those wins every single day and celebrate them. Get a journal and start keeping track of those wins. On hard days, look back and remember why you are in this profession.

One of my biggest wins from when I was in the classroom was taking a student, who had never left Tulare, on a trip to San Diego. As we drove down the freeway, his face reflected the awe of the surrounding landscape. Offering this student such an eye-opening experience felt like a significant victory for me. Another win that I had in my classroom was when I sent a postcard home to a parent, expressing how much I appreciated their child's presence in my class. For other teachers, this student was a headache, but we got along great and I really enjoyed him. A few days later his mom called and interrupted my class demanding to speak with me immediately.



Overwhelmed with emotion, she shared that my postcard was the first positive communication she had received from a teacher regarding her son. She thanked me profusely for recognizing the potential she knew existed within her child. Find the wins every day.

Number five: Reach beyond your comfort zone. I know that as education students we made friends at our universities, and when we attend professional development events, regional meetings, or contests we tend to gravitate toward those we are familiar with. But here's the thing: within our state, there are hundreds of individuals with valuable resources and knowledge, eager to share and impart their insights with you. A number of agricultural teachers entered our field from the industry or out-of-state universities, and consequently, they might not have the same established connections. Be willing to strike up a conversation with someone that you may not know very well. You might be amazed at what you learn, or the new support system you build, and it might even encourage the other person to stay in our profession.

Number six: It is absolutely okay to have a life outside of school. You need to reserve at least one day a month to do something that's just for you. That might sound selfish, but it's the best thing that you can do for you. Sleep on the couch, watch Hallmark movies, take a hike, whatever it is that you enjoy doing – go out and do it. Schedule it on your calendar and do not deviate from it.

Number seven: Invest in your professional skills. If there's a skill or a trait that you would like to develop, sharpen that skill by finding professional opportunities that will help you grow. This approach will not only revitalize you within the classroom but will also yield long-term benefits for your students.

Number eight: Your VOICE matters. Speak up if you have insights that can enhance both the profession and your program. Your voice matters. You hold significance within our community, and your opinions and ideas have the potential to move our profession forward. However, I advise against solely presenting grievances. Try to offer solutions to the challenges you encounter and bring those forward as well. Be open to engaging in conversations about our history and traditions.

Wishing you a long, happy, and successful career.

